Interview with Mr. Marc E. Nicholson , 2011

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

MARC E. NICHOLSON

Interviewed by: Charles Stuart Kennedy

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Q: Today is July 28th. This is an interview with Marc E. Nicholson. What does the E stand for?

NICHOLSON: Edwin.

Q: This is being done on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training and I'm Charles Stuart Kennedy. Do you go by Marc?

NICHOLSON: Yes.

Q: Let's start at the beginning. Could you tell me when and where you were born and something about your family?

NICHOLSON: I was born in Los Angeles on February 1, 1950.

Q: Tell me the background of the Nicholsons from your father's side and then we'll go to your mother's side.

NICHOLSON: My father's parents were both Swedish immigrants to this country who arrived in the 1890s and ended up in Telluride, Colorado— a mining town in the San Juan

Mountains which eventually went into decline and then, beginning in the late 1970s, was revived as an upscale ski resort. My dad was educated at the University of Denver as an accountant and then in 1929 married my mother. Almost immediately thereafter they moved to California to seek their fortune just as the Depression was getting underway. That move always has struck me as rather courageous. But they never seemed to have any difficulty in making their way. He soon found a job at Paramount Pictures Corporation in Hollywood, ultimately becoming the firm's chief accountant and acting comptroller. My mother worked as a legal secretary, but after I was born she became what was then known as a “homemaker.”

Q: Do you know where in Sweden your grandparents came from?

NICHOLSON: Both of them came from tiny villages just outside the small town of Gullabo, located about 30 miles southwest of Kalmar, which is one of the principal coastal cities of Sweden, about 200 miles southwest of Stockholm.

Q: Do you know what drove them out?

NICHOLSON: I would presume that, as with so many Swedes who emigrated in that period, it was the result of overpopulation, the press of population on the land. Families then typically were large, and there was simply not a sufficient economic support base, in particular not enough land in a family, to support all the younger generation as they reached adulthood.

Q: Did they come out of a farming community?

NICHOLSON: Yes. From genealogical research in Swedish records, I believe both my grandfather's and my grandmother's parents and their forebearers were farmers. It was a rural area with small clusters of households and the one small town of Gullabo. There was no industry that I'm aware of, with the possible exception of forestry, which is possible in much of Sweden. Interestingly enough, my grandfather's childhood house—which was

quite large and apparently well built—still stands and eventually became a center for community events and celebrations.

Q: Were your grandparents alive when you were a kid?

NICHOLSON: My father's mother was alive until 1961 when I was 11. Her husband died very early when my father was not quite 4 years old. He was a miner and contracted tuberculosis—perhaps associated with silicosis, to which miners of that era were subject.

Q: Was Sweden known as a good old country? Was there much talk about Sweden?

NICHOLSON: There was very little of it since I was the third generation in the U.S., and since my Swedish grandmother lived in Denver when I was growing up. My father did speak some Swedish and used it occasionally with her when he visited her in Colorado or she visited us, but otherwise it was never used in our household and there were few references to Sweden during my childhood.

Q: How about your mother's background?

NICHOLSON: She was born in a small clapboard mining town in southern Illinois—Craig—which literally no longer exists. Her father also was a miner, a coal miner, who ultimately moved with his wife—my maternal grandmother—to Louisville, Colorado just outside of Denver, which is where my parents met while my father was attending university. My maternal grandfather's family have been in America since before the Revolution. My mother's mother came out of Texas: one side of her family were Scotch-Irish emigrants from County Cavan, Ireland; the others were German immigrants from near Mainz in Rhineland-Pfalz, who had left Europe in the mid-1840s basically, as the oral tradition goes, so that the younger boy, my grandmother's grandfather, could escape being drafted into the Prussian Army.

Q: Did your mother go to college?

NICHOLSON: No, she went to a commercial school which taught secretarial skills. They were called “commercial colleges” in that period. She had no formal higher education.

Q: And your father went where?

NICHOLSON: He went to the University of Denver and took an accounting degree.

Q: Did they leave shortly thereafter for California?

NICHOLSON: Quite soon. He graduated around 1928, and in 1929 they decided to go to California.

Q: So they had been quite well settled in California by the time you came along.

NICHOLSON: Yes, some twenty years. I was unexpected. They had assumed that, because of the aftermath of some surgery my mother underwent in the 1930s, she couldn't have children. And then, lo and behold, I showed up when she was 40, which was a pretty advanced age to bear a child in that era. My dad then was in his mid-40s.

Q: Where did you live?

NICHOLSON: After my first year or so, we moved from the apartment where they had been living in Hollywood and into more spacious quarters, which they thought necessary with a child. So we moved to a house in Burbank, which is an independent city in the San Fernando Valley within the greater L.A. metropolitan area.

Q: Did your father talk much about the early days of getting involved with Paramount Pictures?

NICHOLSON: No, not a great deal—or at least not that I remember, since he died when I was only 12. He just started in the accounting department at Paramount and then worked his way up over a period of more than twenty years.

Q: I'm told that the movies... that accounting really became quite something if you got involved in it because there were big business decisions about where to allocate things and all that. Did he enjoy it?

NICHOLSON: I think he did. That was the heyday of the studio system and of big movie productions, including when he was at Paramount: Cecil B. DeMille's “The Ten Commandments,” for example. Although the accounting department didn't have the glamour of the movie set, it was an interesting business. Occasionally it brought him and me into contact with some of the Hollywood motion picture stars.

Q: You grew up in Burbank?

NICHOLSON: Yes.

Q: What was it like in those days?

NICHOLSON: It was a middle class community which was in part a bedroom community for Los Angeles but also had its own industry. Most notably, Lockheed Aircraft Corporation had a large manufacturing facility there, which included the “Skunk Works,” the unit which developed the U-2 and the SR-71 “spy planes” with which I later became involved in my State Department career. In addition, Burbank then as now was as much a focus of the Hollywood movie industry as was Hollywood itself. Disney Studios were there, as was Columbia Pictures. The Universal Studio lot was right on the frontier on the Los Angeles side. NBC's principal West Coast studios were located in Burbank—hence all those Johnny Carson “Tonight Show” jokes about “beautiful downtown Burbank.” The town was a quiet, stable, classically '50s, white, and mainly middle class community.

Q: Did you go to public schools in that area?

NICHOLSON: For kindergarten through 2nd grade I went to a private military school in the Hollywood area called Black Fox Military Academy. Thereafter, beginning at grade 3,

I matriculated into the public school system of Burbank and remained there through high school.

Q: Do you recall anything about Black Fox?

NICHOLSON: Not a great deal, only that it was a nice campus lodged in a leafy residential neighborhood, and that at the end of the school year, they would have a big parade and review as part of graduation ceremonies and would seek the presence of some luminary from the military to preside. Gen. Omar Bradley was there one year, so I got to shake Omar Bradley's hand.

Q: It was quite well known particularly in the movie industry. A lot of the movie people sent their children there.

NICHOLSON: That may well have been. One of my classmates was Jerry Lewis' son.

Q: Burbank public schools... What subjects did you enjoy in elementary school?

NICHOLSON: Social studies, although I'm not quite sure how they were labeled then at the elementary school level: history, civics, that sort of thing.

Q: Were you much of a reader?

NICHOLSON: Very much so.

Q: Do you remember what books you liked to read as a kid?

NICHOLSON: Mainly non-fiction, I believe, particularly books on history and current events periodicals. I was much taken with Civil War history at one point. I can't recall much in the way of fiction from that period, although as a young kid I enjoyed comic books, especially science fiction. I still have a weakness for science fiction movies.

Q: How about at home? Did you have brothers or sisters?

NICHOLSON: I was it.

Q: This must have been quite a surprise for your parents.

NICHOLSON: It was. The disadvantage of being an only child is that you don't bump up against siblings. I think that tends to lead perhaps to a little greater introspection or even shyness, at least when you're young. On the other hand, there's no competition for attention. I was very much the apple of my parents' eyes, as they had wanted children but did not expect to have any.

Q: How was the high school you attended in Burbank?

NICHOLSON: It was good. This was back in the good old days when the public school system was well supported in California, which has not been the case for the last 20-30 years, in part because Proposition 13 constrained the property tax base which was a principal source of funding. It was an era when you had generally good teachers in part because the career options then open to women were limited and therefore you had some very bright and qualified women taking jobs that they would not have done if they had had competitive options outside the educational sector, which doesn't pay all that well. And it was an era just before the Burbank classrooms were reached by the epidemic of drug use which developed in the U.S. in the early to mid-'60s as part of the general social upheaval of that time.

Q: In high school, were you involved in any activities?

NICHOLSON: I was in the debating society. That was the main thing.

Q: What about classes? Any particular subjects by the time you reached high school that you were especially interested in?

NICHOLSON: History and literature. I was never much taken with the sciences or with mathematics, though as a straight-A “grind” I did well in all my subjects. I was more interested in the social sciences and secondarily the humanities.

Q: In California at that time, did the outside world intrude much? Did you get much of a feel for events in Europe or in the Far East?

NICHOLSON: Yes, I was very interested in international affairs going back at least to junior high school, and also in domestic politics. My mother was active in political party organizations and that rubbed off on me. I was even doing door-to-door political campaign work in the '64 presidential elections when I was fourteen.

Q: Where did your parents fall on the political spectrum?

NICHOLSON: They were conservative Republicans and that's where I began, not surprisingly, although by now I'm a centrist, or—as I prefer to believe—a “radical pragmatist” who defies easy classification.

Q: Was it Orange County?

NICHOLSON: No, it was L.A. County.

Q: I think it's Orange County that has the quite conservative...

NICHOLSON: Yes, but Southern California in general in that period and still to a certain extent is very much on the conservative side at least when it comes to the Republican Party. So, I was engaged in the 1964 campaign doing door-to-door campaigning, leafleting, and “get out the vote” work for Barry Goldwater. I guess it was through introduction to U.S. politics that I became interested more broadly in public affairs and for some reason that tended rather early on to focus on foreign affairs. So I was pretty well defined in my interests by the time I reached high school. It was a natural step thereafter to

begin contemplating the Foreign Service as a possible option if I wished to make a career of my interest in foreign affairs and particularly international politics. The only other career I seriously considered was becoming a lawyer—more as a default option because it was “something one did” and potentially opened other doors, than because I had any really keen interest in it.

Q: At home, being the only child, did you get involved in dinner table talk over events?

NICHOLSON: Somewhat, although I don't recall that there was much “table time” given over to public affairs. Again, however, this may be because by the time I was old enough to be very aware of such things, my father had died and so the table was limited to myself and my mother.

Q: In high school, did you get involved in any summer jobs?

NICHOLSON: No. My parents gave me a weekly allowance, and I did chores for them to earn it, typically yard work of various kinds. But there were no summer jobs taken outside the household.

Q: You graduated when?

NICHOLSON: '67.

Q: Did you have any idea of where you were going to college?

NICHOLSON: Yes. I had talked with high school counselors and poured through college manuals and compendiums of descriptions of various colleges, and I was aiming high. I thought I was in a position to aim high given my grade point average, SAT scores, and so on. I was interested in seeing the world and getting away from home and more on my own. So, I applied to Stanford, to one Ivy League school, to the University of Chicago, and to a smattering of others and ended up being accepted to all of them and choosing to go to Dartmouth College, which turned out to be a mistake. People on the East Coast have

the advantage of being able to visit Eastern campuses and take a first hand look and get the real feel of them, whereas someone living on the West Coast is not in a position to do that unless his family is affluent enough to finance such a survey trip. The true nature of Dartmouth in that era didn't come through to me just reading the college catalogues upon which I had relied.

Q: We're talking about isolation?

NICHOLSON: No, we're talking about what was then kind of the “Animal House” of the Ivy League, a school for smart jocks, with a rather broad anti-intellectual streak present on campus.

Q: “Dartmouth's in town again. Run, girls, run?”

NICHOLSON: Yes. I mean, Dartmouth has changed tremendously and positively in the last 35 years and consciously has sought to reorient itself away from that stereotype, which was pretty close to reality at the time I attended. But when I arrived there, within one week I had determined that I was going to transfer. I hadn't worked all that hard in high school to get into a good college, only to go back to encountering some of the same kinds of sophomoric people I thought I was leaving forever when I departed high school. So within the first week, I determined to transfer and made applications to various places. The following year, I transferred to Yale, with which I was very happy.

Q: At Dartmouth, were you able to wind your way through any intellectual environment? They had good professors.

NICHOLSON: They had some very good professors and there was a minority of students, a clique if you will, who were really interested in intellectual life. I tended to fall in with them. But they did not set the tone of the place.

Q: How did this get going?

NICHOLSON: I really don't know how these traditions build up over time. It may be that Dartmouth began a bit off the beaten track in rural New Hampshire well away from urban areas and thus developed its own personality. It was and is probably the most close knit of Ivy League schools, the one which gives its freshman class the tightest bonding experience in the sense of a tribal identity and lifelong loyalty to the school. That's all to the good. It's got a beautiful campus. So there is something to be said for that, but it had this other side which led me to be dissatisfied at the time. Having said that, I would highly recommend today's Dartmouth and, in fact, since retiring I have done a couple alumni interviews for them of student applicants.

Q: You went from Yale from '68 to when?

NICHOLSON: To '71.

Q: How did you find Yale?

NICHOLSON: Yale was academically as or more rigorous. Equally important to me, the student body was more intellectually inclined and academically serious. As a venue, Yale was not nearly as physically attractive as Dartmouth, which looks like a “Reader's Digest” cover or a Norman Rockwell painting—and perhaps has been the subject of one in the past. Dartmouth is in the midst of very pretty pastoral and forest country in mid-New Hampshire, whereas Yale is an urban campus in the middle of what was then and to an extent remains a decaying 19th century manufacturing town, New Haven. And, as is typical of a larger university, one isn't always as able to get close access to or interaction with the faculty, especially one which is oriented considerably towards research as versus teaching. One had easier faculty access at Dartmouth. So there were pluses and minuses, but overall I was very pleased that I had changed colleges. And ending up at Yale repaired a failure of judgment—or nerve—I had shown when applying to colleges from high school in the first place. I believe I had avoided applying to Yale, Harvard, or Princeton because I feared I couldn't get in. As I discovered when applying to transfer from Dartmouth to Yale

or another college, I had underestimated myself. That lesson was helpful in building self-confidence.

Q: How did Yale work? You were in a house?

NICHOLSON: No. Yale patterned itself after Oxford and Cambridge with a residential college system in which, after spending freshman year all together in one part of the campus - that's an experience I never had because I transferred in as a sophomore - sophomores and beyond were lodged in about twelve different residential colleges. Each “college” provided their housing, their dining facility, intramural sports teams within the university, a small library, and its own resident dean. And each college had various professors attached to it, some with offices in that college. They were accessible to all students at Yale, but had a physical foothold in one of the residential colleges. This overall pattern subdivided what would otherwise have been a fairly large and potentially anonymous student body of 4,000 into smaller, more congenial community groupings.

Q: Which residential college were you in?

NICHOLSON: I was in Saybrook.

Q: What subjects did you take?

NICHOLSON: I knew by then that I wanted to enter the Foreign Service, so I took a major in what they termed “Government” because Yale didn't have a separate international relations major at the time. But for all intents and purposes it was an international relations major with some emphasis on Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, but not a really concentrated regional focus.

Q: Language?

NICHOLSON: I took German. I had had Spanish in high school in California.

Q: Did any professors particularly strike you at that time?

NICHOLSON: Several. One was a professor of international relations named H. Bradford Westerfield. He was a very dynamic fellow, and was teaching courses on the instruments of U.S. foreign policy and the dynamics of international relations. Another was a professor named Wolfgang Leonhard who taught the history of the Soviet Union, having fled East Germany and sought asylum in the West after previously being a member of the East German Politburo or Central Committee. He was an interesting man. But the person who struck me by far the most of the professors I had in college was A. Bartlett Giamatti, who at that time was a professor in the English Department, focusing on Renaissance literature. Each year he led a seminar of about 13 people to take you through a two-semester survey of the great works of epic Western literature. He was a superb teacher, with a great Socratic method of bringing you out, but at the same time very incisive commentary of his own. His Socratic dialogue was not a free-for-all—it had direction. He later became President of Yale University, subsequently gave that up to become Commissioner of Major League Baseball, which was his great love, and then unfortunately died of a heart attack at a very young age in his early 50s. I remember him very fondly as a great teacher and an exciting and incisive intellectual to know, and also as a man who, though nominally liberal on some issues, was conservative in his instincts and his assumptions about human behavior...which pretty much describes where I come out.

Q: He was a major figure. Did international relations, diplomacy, Foreign Service, come across your radar?

NICHOLSON: As early as high school and probably junior high school, I was interested in foreign affairs. That grew. By middle to late high school, I was at least dimly aware of the Foreign Service as a career option. Then certainly throughout college I was familiar with it. It seemed the best choice for someone at that time who wanted to get involved in foreign affairs, especially in a public political affairs capacity as versus a business capacity.

Q: Did you meet anybody from the Foreign Service?

NICHOLSON: I don't believe I ever did. Certainly I never ran across any recruiters at Yale or at job fairs. It's possible that one or another Foreign Service Officer may have been at the university giving a lecture on some topic, but I have no recollection of having personal contact.

Q: Did you get any chance to go overseas?

NICHOLSON: No, not until after graduating from university, apart from a couple hiking trips in the Canadian Rockies during summers off from college.

Q: You graduated in '71. The Vietnam War was beginning to run down by that time.

NICHOLSON: Yes, it was, but I was still subject to the draft. In December 1969 there was a televised nationwide draft lottery one night covering males 18 to 25 or 26 years of age and reordering their priority for induction, basing it on the lottery number corresponding to their month/day of birth. Moreover, by that time graduate school attendance in most cases no longer provided deferment—only undergraduate school did. In the lottery, my birth date of February 1 drew number 86 out of 365 (or 366, since a leap year date was included). That was low enough to make it very likely that I was going to be drafted after graduation, which also happened in the end to be the last year in which the draft was in effect. The Army even then was beginning to transition into an all volunteer force, but that transition had not been completed. So, I determined that rather than be drafted and sent at random to an assignment in the Army, or becoming an officer which also gave you no choice of assignment, I would try to get some say over what I was doing by enlisting, which gave you the right to choose the military specialty in which you would be working. That cost me an extra year of service: three years as an enlistee versus two years as a draftee. But I thought it was a reasonable trade. I had gone through the Foreign Service exam process in my senior year of university and been put on the rank order roster of qualified

candidates for future job offers, although at that time State never told you exactly where you stood on that roster. (When I entered the military, the State Department stopped the clock ticking on what was normally a three-year period during which, if you were on the rank order roster, you had to receive a firm job offer to join the Foreign Service or else start all over again.) I also, not knowing what the results of the Foreign Service exam might ultimately be, had applied to various law schools and been admitted to Harvard, Yale, and Stanford Law Schools, among others. So I also put those on hold for three years while I did military service. Then when I came back, I had to choose which route to follow - law school or Foreign Service - and I chose the Foreign Service. It's curious, or perhaps sobering, how a few key forks in the road define much of your life. That fork largely defined mine.

Q: What did you do in the military?

NICHOLSON: As an enlistee I was able to choose the Military Intelligence (MI) Branch, which struck me both as intellectually interesting and as potentially having some application to what I might be doing later if I joined the State Department. In fact it did, since a number of my tours in the Foreign Service were spent in political-military affairs. In the Army I was what they called an order of battle analyst, which is someone who studies the opposing side - in this case the Warsaw Pact forces as well as some of the militaries in the Middle East - in order to be familiar with their organization, weaponry, and tactics, so as to be able to support U.S. units in combat by interpreting intelligence that comes in and developing a picture of who we are facing, in what strength, along what lines of advance, and so on. I was assigned to the MI unit of the First Armored Division in Germany, departing the U.S. in March of '72, spending about six months at the division headquarters in a town called Goeppingen about 30-40 miles east of Stuttgart in southern Germany, and then moving with the headquarters to a new location closer to the potential line of battle on the inter-German border. I spent my last two years at that new location in the town of Ansbach about 30-40 miles west of Nuremberg in southern Bavaria. In a way it was a very enjoyable time. It was a vacation from responsibility because I had worked very

hard in college (I graduated from Yale summa cum laude) to build a dossier that would get me the career of my choice and then, once I entered on that career, I could expect to be working very hard to lay the basis for a successful professional life. Military service was a period in the middle where I was doing my duty, doing my best, but was not in an occupation that I planned to pursue, and thus I could be relatively relaxed about life, and frankly—as an enlisted man—not a whole lot was expected of me in any case.

Q: I did the same. Looking back on it, I'm almost ashamed at how relaxed I was. I did my job, but...

NICHOLSON: Yes. So, one had interesting work, basically 9 to 5 days, and weekends off when you jumped into a car on late Friday afternoon and drove 3-5 hours down to the Swiss or Austrian borders and spent the weekend roaming the Alps. I've always loved alpine mountain scenery, so I was very much in my element.

Q: How were you looking at the Soviet opposition? What were you picking up?

NICHOLSON: They were very formidable and if there had ever been an all-out attack we would have been forced to use tactical nuclear weapons at a very early stage, the alternative being to be pushed back out of Germany. Not only were the numbers in terms of manpower and equipment adverse to the Allied side, but the U.S. Army in that period in Europe was in a very bad state of morale. Drug use imported from GIs leaving Vietnam after their one-year tours and coming to Europe and bringing that pattern with them had affected a number of units. This period of the late '60s/early '70s also was among the most difficult in the U.S. in terms of racial tensions and a shift among parts of the civil rights movement from integration as an ideal to black consciousness and separatism, and those trends transferred themselves into the Army as well, which reflected the society out of which it came. So, you had drug problems, racial tensions, and a general slackness of morale. It was a force that did not give one great confidence that we'd have very many

options in the event of an all-out war in Europe except to either accept defeat or move very quickly to a nuclear environment.

Q: You say you took the written and oral Foreign Service exam before you went into the military. Do you recall anything on the oral exam?

NICHOLSON: Only that I was given a proposition on which to comment in a kind of oral essay form. I also believe I was given some “What if” questions in order to formulate solutions to problems. I was asked some biographic questions. I remember the president of the three-person panel by name, Mary Olmsted, who ended up as ambassador to Papua New Guinea and was something of a pioneer among women in the Foreign Service in reaching the Senior Service and Ambassadorial rank.

Q: You got out of the military when?

NICHOLSON: Late '74.

Q: Then what happened?

NICHOLSON: I took a “European out,” that is, I chose to be mustered out of the Army in Europe rather than the U.S. and then spent a month traveling around Europe and would have spent more time except that I reactivated my application to the Foreign Service in tandem with my departure from the Army. Not having been advised where I stood on the candidate rank order roster, I did not know how long it might take to get a phone call from State offering me a position. I wanted to allow a reasonable amount of time for that to transpire before I had to fish or cut bait as regards the standing offers of admission to Yale and Harvard Law Schools. They would have required a decision by something on the order of February, March, April at the latest. So, I didn't want to wait too long and perhaps miss the opportunity to matriculate into law school the next Fall, and on the other hand, I didn't want to enter law school only to receive a Foreign Service offer and face a choice of curtailing from school almost as soon as I arrived. So I wanted to give a reasonable

amount of time for the Foreign Service option hopefully to work itself out one way or the other. And so I immediately reactivated my application to the Service, figuring it would take several months. In fact, I was asked to show up for the next A-100 course in January, so that forced a curtailment of my dream of bumming around Europe for three months. I got about one month out of that “European out” and then I had to fly back to the States.

Q: This would be January '75?

NICHOLSON: Probably late November or December of '74, with a brief period at home to prepare before going to Washington to begin the A-100 course in January.

Q: What was your A-100 course like, the composition of your class?

NICHOLSON: It was typical of the time, which is to say considerably different from what we see now in that the majority, probably the great majority, of students were fresh out of university or only very recently graduated and were in their early to mid-20s. There may have been a few who were older, but if they were older, it was as often as not because they had gone on to graduate school and taken MAs or in one case a Ph.D., as versus outside work experience related or unrelated to the Foreign Service—which I gather is more common now in matriculating A-100 classes. For the time, it was fairly large class, about 40-50 people.

Q: Many women, minorities?

NICHOLSON: There were some women, some minorities, though probably not in the numbers we see now. There was definitely more than a smattering, but still the class was predominantly white and male.

Q: How did you feel the basic officer course did as far as introducing you to the business?

NICHOLSON: Within the limits set by the course length, which at that time was four weeks, it was alright as a basic orientation. They couldn't take you over ground in

international relations that hopefully you had acquired in your college career. It tended to be practically focused, a nuts and bolts overview of the mechanisms and the conventions of the Foreign Service, which was a reasonable approach. On the other hand, the consular course, which I took immediately thereafter since it was assumed that most junior officers then, as now, would do some consular work at least in the first phase of their career, was extremely poor. This was before the days of ConGen Rosslyn and the course was unrealistic in the weight it gave to abstruse nationality casethat is, law and precedents by which one determined whether somebody had or had not acquired U.S. citizenship, in the sorts of circumstances you'd encounter once in 10,000 cases - whereas it neglected the very basics of stamping visas and the details of handling far more frequent visa cases.

Q: As you were doing this, did you have an area or a specialty you wanted to get into?

NICHOLSON: At that time, as now, and excepting an interval in the '80s/'90s of undifferentiated recruitment, you had to apply for a particular cone when taking the Foreign Service exam. I applied as a political officer. It was the only field I was interested in and the only field I would have accepted. So, at that time it was pretty much preordained what you were going to do in terms of “cone” when you went in.

Q: Any area of specialty, geographic, or not?

NICHOLSON: In general, my druthers were either Europe or East Asia. I thought that's where the major events defining the future were most likely to occur. Although interested in the region's politics, I was averse to making a career in the Middle East or the Near Eastern Bureau because I saw it as a perpetual exercise in damage limitation, given the foreseeably persistent U.S. tilt towards the Israeli side of the Arab-Israeli conflict, which was continually going to put us at loggerheads with the Arab world. I didn't think that making a career out of damage limitation seemed all that appealing. So I basically excluded the Near East. I hoped that I would become involved in one way or another with Europe or East Asia.

Q: So when it came time for a first assignment, what happened?

NICHOLSON: As is usual, whatever I wanted proved pretty irrelevant. I ended up being assigned to Brasilia. My choices resolved down to the consulate in Adana, Turkey, which was there basically to serve Incirlik Air Base, or going to the embassy in Brasilia as a political officer, so I opted for Brasilia.

Q: You were in Brasilia from when to when?

NICHOLSON: From summer of '75 to summer of '77.

Q: Where did Brasilia stand at this point? Had they moved the whole embassy out of Rio to Brasilia by this point?

NICHOLSON: By then most, if not all, embassy functions had been transferred and we occupied a modest but permanent facility, unlike during the first year or two of Brasilia's existence, when somebody was up there occupying a trailer just to show the flag. We were past that point. In fact, while I was there, the Department undertook construction of a major addition to the chancery, which more than doubled the space and is the dominant structural element of it today. So, yes, the U.S. embassy had made the move, but Brasilia was still a bit of a pioneer place in feel.

Q: What was it like? I always think of it as having big parks but not very livable.

NICHOLSON: At that time it wasn't a very attractive place to live. It was very dusty. The soil in that part of the country is a red lateritic soil with a lot of iron in it. Because the city was fairly new, the grass and other vegetation they had planted had not fully taken root, so there was red dust everywhere. If anybody wanted to dry their clothes out on a clothes line, the sheets would end up mildly pink by the time they were done. There were large termite mounds in the so-called “gardens” around the apartment buildings which formed most of the residential areas where we lived. The city had relatively few outlets for

entertainment. There were perhaps two movie theaters in town. Consumer goods were very limited and overpriced because of Brazilian efforts to sustain infant industries with a tariff which kept out foreign goods in order to privilege shoddily made and overpriced domestic products. The city was located in the midst of a vast, somewhat dry, undulating savannah hundreds of miles from anything of much interest. It was an isolated post with not a whole lot to do, albeit with a decent climate. And, as I mentioned, with a bit of a pioneering feel to it. They had not completed all of the apartment blocks. In some zones, buildings were dotted here and there with large empty lots between them. The major showcase buildings in the government sector downtown had been completed, but the residential areas were still rather spotty.

Q: Were you married at the time?

NICHOLSON: No.

Q: I would think this would be pretty difficult for a bachelor. I wouldn't think the corps of young ladies would be very large as compared to Rio or something.

NICHOLSON: That's true. On the other hand, smaller and more isolated posts tend to encourage the wider international diplomatic community to cohere and develop social outlets—multinational happy hours and that kind of thing. Of course, for Americans it always happens first and foremost with the British, then the Australians, and so on. So that widened the circle a bit.

Q: Who was your ambassador when you were there?

NICHOLSON: It was John Hugh Crimmins, who was one of the classic grand old ambassadors, a brilliant man, Harvard-educated, very strong personality. He had served earlier as essentially the U.S. proconsul in the Dominican Republic after the U.S. invasion there in the mid-1960s. An able man. But quite a formidable personality.

Q: Who was the DCM and political counselor?

NICHOLSON: The DCM was Richard Johnson. The political counselor was David Simcox, who was a Latin Americanist by career, later went on to be country director for Mexico, retired not too long thereafter, and then became involved in advocacy groups for immigration law reform.

Q: I knew Dick. I took Serbian with Dick and his wife, Patricia. Very nice people.

NICHOLSON: Yes, they were.

Q: What piece of the action did you have?

NICHOLSON: Having accepted a full two-year assignment to Brasilia as a political officer, I was—shall we say—"double-crossed" by the post when I arrived and instead spent my first year as the consular officer there, which I might add was something of a trial by fire because there weren't very many people around with past consular experience whom I could consult, and I was the sole officer in the consular section and theoretically represented U.S. consular interests throughout the country to the Foreign Ministry. That's when I came to the early realization that the FSI consular course as it was then constituted was terribly deficient. I was glad to see later when FSI converted to the ConGen Roslyn concept, which appeared to give much more practical hands-on training to officers. I headed the Consular Section for a year and then moved to the Political Section, where it fell to me as the junior officer, as is still often the case, to cover the human rights portfolio and participate in the drafting and/or the editing of the Annual Human Rights Report. As part of that, I monitored dissident movements in the country, which was then under a military dictatorship and thus generated plenty to report upon. In addition, I handled a recently established program we had to furnish anti-narcotics assistance in the form of equipment to the Brazilian federal police. Those were my primary areas of focus.

Q: Did you have many consular problems? I don't imagine there was much immigration.

NICHOLSON: No. Immigrant visa applications were processed by the Consulate General in Rio. One had a nonimmigrant visa application load and the usual cases there of visa refusals. There were Americans in jail every once in a while to be attended to. You had people who went missing in the Amazon Basin. In fact, there was one particular case I recall of a couple girls who started an Amazonian expedition in Peru or Ecuador and thereafter disappeared. The case got a lot of attention in the States because their father was a man named Yoder, who was a prominent journalist, and the family bent great efforts to raising the profile of the matter. But in those kinds of missing person cases, you were limited in what you could do. There were three million square kilometers of jungle out there and almost no Brazilian government presence. Whether it was the Embassy in Brasilia handling it, or—as in this case—the consulate in Belem which had the lead, you could have Brazilian authorities check border control records at the point of entry along the Amazon River. You could alert the Brazilian military police units up there to be on the lookout. But beyond that, there wasn't a lot one could do in terms of trying to focus any search, since the area was so huge, the jungle impenetrable to aerial search and largely roadless, and the Brazilian government without many resources. In the course of my consular year I handled one or two cases of Americans dying in my consular district. That was always a race against time because the local authorities required that people be buried within a very short period (I believe within 72 hours) of death. There was little or no tradition of embalming in the country. So when an American citizen died and you had to try to locate the next of kin, inform them, obtain decisions from them about burial in place or repatriation to the U.S., and then implement those decisions within a couple days, it was, as I said, a race against the clock. Fortunately, the best thing I inherited from my predecessor in the job was a relationship with a doctor in one of the local hospitals who was prepared with a wink and a nod put the deceased literally on ice in the “refrigerator” of the hospital to buy us some additional time to be able to contact the next of kin and take

action according to their desires, particularly if they wished the remains to be repatriated to the U.S.

Q: What were you getting from the officers at the embassy about our view of the military government at that time? We're talking about '75 to '77.

NICHOLSON: The military had been ruling the country since the coup in 1964 and had gone through several administrations. The president in office at the time was a former general named Ernesto Geisel. The Brazilian military, unlike some of its professional colleagues elsewhere in Latin America at that time, did not aspire to a permanent role in the governance of the country. Their attitude was that they had come in to clean out the stables of corruption and disorder (as they saw it) created by weak, corrupt, or incompetent civilian administrations; to lay some institutional foundations that would allow for the eventual emergence of a democracy which was stable and within certain ideological limits, that is, not oriented too far to the left; and then slowly to move themselves out of power. Moreover, this was not a military government in a hands-on way. They largely retained the technocratic bureaucracy, and technocrats occupied many of the cabinet portfolios, especially those having to do with economics, but also justice and foreign affairs. So it was the military providing overall direction and supervision and if necessary the muscle for what was in major degree essentially a civilian technocratic government. Geisel was the first in a line of several presidents of Brazil under this military system to initiate what they consciously foresaw as a paced move back to democracy, meaning easing up in a measured way over time and hoping that as they did they would leave behind them the basis for stability within a democratic system, perhaps a guided democratic system. That's pretty much the view we had of them, although we were dissatisfied with some of the repressive measures the military took. They were never as bloody-minded as their military counterparts in Argentina and Uruguay, and were much more drawn towards the use of formal legal systems to prosecute people as versus simply “disappearing” them off the streets, as occurred frequently then in Montevideo or in Buenos Aires. Nonetheless, it was ultimately a repressive apparatus. Certain parts of

the country under certain regional military commanders had a reputation for a more mailed fist than others and were a focus of concern for us. A particular area of concern was the Fourth Military Region covering Brazil's Northeast centered on Recife, which has always been among the poorest and most backward parts of the country, where social tensions were potentially highest, where the Catholic church had taken a social gospel position under Archbishop Dom Helder Camara and was active on behalf of the poor, and where social movements were particularly prominent and thus from time to time repressed.

Q: What were you doing? How did you operate in that?

NICHOLSON: Within limits, because since we had consulates at that time in five other Brazilian cities, namely in Belem, Recife, Sao Paulo, Porto Alegre, and Salvador, most of the reporting from hotspots in the field came out of those consulates. There was neither justification, nor inclination on the part of the budgetary people, for me to be roaming around and into other people's consular districts and their reporting “turf.” So, my role was limited to talking with those dissidents or organizations which had some reach or presence in Brasilia, following the Brazilian press, following the reporting of my colleagues in the field, and then synthesizing all of the above in reports to Washington.

Q: There was considerable pressure within our embassy in Buenos Aires on human rights later on - do you go with the government or do you report on the beastliness of the government? Did you feel pressures about what to pass on to Washington and what not to?

NICHOLSON: No, I don't think so, except that, where there was room for interpretation one way or the other or where one could choose your words one way or the other, there was a general inclination to be fairly moderate rather than denunciatory in tone and reporting. But there was a genuine effort to keep book as best we could as to who was being arrested, incidents of mistreatment, the legislative framework of the system in terms of more repressive legislation, and so on. There may not have been as much “pressure”

on reporting in Brasilia as there was in Buenos Aires for the simple reason that the human rights problems, while present, were not as acute in Brazil as they were in Argentina. Yes, people were arrested, but they were brought to trial and sentenced. While one might disagree with the sentence and the basic laws which underlay those sentences, at least there was some transparency in the system. People ended up going into jail but they ended up walking out of jail, unlike the situation in Argentina, where over the course of several years, 30,000 people or so simply disappeared and were slaughtered without even the most minimum judicial formalities. So, human rights was a problem in Brazil, but less acute.

Q: Was there any indigenous rebellion? There was a student organized group that kidnapped Ambassador Elbrick back in the '60s. Was there anything going on while you were there of that nature?

NICHOLSON: I think not, with one possible exception. By the time I got there, the worst was over in terms of violent guerrilla movements directed against the regime and of truly violent regime repression in response. There were people in Brazil, as I have heard, who were “disappeared” in the period of the '60s/early 70s—though never in the numbers in Argentina—as part of government offensives against armed terrorist/guerilla groups. Those groups had been disbanded or crushed by the regime by the time I arrived. The one possible exception is that in parts of the Amazon region, particularly in the southern part of the state of Para, there were persistent attempts to develop guerrilla movements, which took place in areas so remote that not much word got out about what was happening. I was unaware of them until twenty years later when I went back to Brazil and my landlord at the time happened to be a former priest who had been very active in the social gospel movement and who was writing a book about guerrilla movements in the Amazon. He mentioned them to me, and some fragments of those movements may have persisted into the period when I was first in Brazil, though I doubt it. So, in essence, the answer to your question is no. The period of terrorism and guerrilla warfare had passed by the mid-'70s.

Q: Was there a feeling that the government was moving towards an end to military...

NICHOLSON: I believe there was, but there was also a growing impatience in society with the pace, which was deemed to be too slow. It was a phenomenon I think is typical in such circumstances, which is that the period of greatest protest or at least of impatience and vocal dissatisfaction comes not during the era of greatest repression. It comes when that repression begins to be lifted, because all of the frustrations and the pressures that were building up in the previous stages can now within limits be voiced in a way that they could not be before. That was the period we were in when I was in Brasilia. Prior censorship of the papers had ceased. Self-censorship was the order of the day with the ultimate potential sanction of a newspaper being suspended or banned if it crossed the line too far. But it was a sanction not often applied, in part because the media were somewhat careful but also because they played clever cat and mouse games with the government in seeing how far they could go without trespassing that line. So there was a certain amount of social communication which provided an echo chamber for civil society at that time and gave voice to its impatience with the pace of change, even though people recognized that things were slowly moving towards a return of democracy.

Q: Did you get any feel from your counterparts of how well the Brazilian civil service and foreign service worked?

NICHOLSON: As institutions generally or in relationship to the military government?

Q: As institutions generally.

NICHOLSON: My principal dealings were with the Foreign Ministry, so I'm really not in a position to comment much on other ministries.

The Foreign Ministry, also known as Itamaraty, had and continues to have a reputation within the Brazilian government as being staffed by the “best and the brightest.” They at that time were still recruited to a considerable degree from the upper classes, which

also gave the institution a certain social clout and cache, although—even in the mid-'70s—the Ministry had begun to diversify its recruitment. Brazilian career diplomats were considered much better than the average Brazilian civil servant. And they had an #lan. They had a great diplomatic history, in that the borders of Brazil were consolidated, in some cases expanded, and certified by treaty largely by peaceful means through the diplomatic efforts of the Baron do Rio Branco, who was essentially the founder of the modern Foreign Ministry in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. So diplomacy has a very high reputation in Brazil—which I suspect we U.S. diplomats might envy in our own body politic, where military heroes play a larger role. With that historic legitimacy and the quality of their people, the career Brazilian foreign service carried real authority in much of foreign affairs decision-making, although ultimately subject to military veto. You for instance then and even now usually see foreign ministers appointed from the career service, not political appointees. At the time I was there, there were no political ambassadors in the foreign ministry and to this day you can probably count the number who have ever served on the fingers of two hands. It is a very tight knit service with the reputation of being one of the most professional and accomplished among the developing countries. And casting them in that “developing country” context is not intended to do them a disservice. Many or most of their people would stand in good comparison with our diplomats. Unfortunately, in the mid-70s many if not most also were still essentially Francophile in their cultural background and outlook, with a concomitant tendency to look askance at the United States due both to nationalist political concerns or “chips on the shoulder,” and to a certain cultural disdain. Those attitudes, by the way, had considerably diminished, though not entirely disappeared, by the time of my second tour in Brazil in the late 90s.

Q: With your counterparts in the Brazilian foreign ministry or other places, was there a lot of grousing about being stuck in Brasilia?

NICHOLSON: Oh, yes. Most of the Brazilian bureaucrats, and perhaps even more so the folks in Itamaraty, detested Brasilia. On Friday afternoons if you would go to the airport, there would be this mass exodus of people taking planes in order to get back to Rio to

spend a weekend. Many of them had been dragged kicking and screaming from Rio to the new capital. Portions of Itamaraty were still in Rio even during the time I was in Brasilia fifteen years after the nominal transfer of the capital. It was to be expected that people who grew up among the scenic delights and cultural opportunities of Rio, not to mention all the social networks they had built there, would not be terribly happy going out to a new city more or less in the middle of nowhere with not much to do. That has changed in the last twenty plus years partly because many people now in Brasilia, especially those coming from the younger generation, don't have Rio as a point of reference and never did, but also because Brasilia itself has become a much more habitable place. Some of them now are pretty glad to be in Brasilia because it doesn't suffer from many of the urban problems that mega-cities elsewhere in Brazil do.

Q: How was Sao Paulo looked upon when you were there?

NICHOLSON: Then as now, it was clear and away the financial center of the country, the business center of the country. A very significant portion of the gross domestic product of Brazil derived from Sao Paulo state. I think nowadays it's on the order of 30-plus percent and it was probably similar then, anywhere between 30 and 40 percent. The inhabitants of Sao Paulo were viewed by Brazilians as the industrious, disciplined businessmen as contrasted with the more laid back, dolce vita folks in Rio de Janeiro. Sao Paulo was and remains the seat of many of the country's most prestigious cultural institutions, museums and so on, because those institutions typically go where the money is, where there is philanthropic support. There may be more institutionalized culture in Sao Paulo than even Rio because of the city's economic dominance of the country. But even then, Sao Paulo was viewed as a mega-city which was getting out of control and ungovernable given the problems typical of large Third World cities or for that matter First World cities, which is to say traffic, pollution, inadequate infrastructure, and criminal violence.

Q: You were the new boy. Did you get any feeling about the relationship between our consuls general in Sao Paulo and Rio and the embassy? Were they little dukes at those places?

NICHOLSON: In this particular case, no. You had the feeling that they on a day to day basis were the masters of their own houses in Sao Paulo or in Rio. But when it came to broader issues, to a certain extent administrative but more to the point as regards political and economic reporting, they were subordinate to Brasilia. That probably reflected the personality of Ambassador Crimmins and his ability to make stick his insistence that there be one coordinated voice from the Mission back to Washington. I know that Sao Paulo and Rio from time to time chafed under the edict that their reporting to Washington and that of all the other consulates had to be first cleared with Brasilia, because that inevitably involved some delay. As I recall, in some cases their reporting to Washington even was sent out from Brasilia with an additional embassy comment rather than directly with an AmConsul or AmConGen Sao Paulo or AmConGen Rio masthead. That probably grated on people having a pride of authorship. So, yes, I learned that potentially you can have fiefdoms that develop but if the ambassador is determined, they can be brought within control.

Q: You were betwixt administrations.

NICHOLSON: I arrived when President Ford was in office and left when President Carter was in office.

Q: Did you get any high level visits while you were there?

NICHOLSON: We had a visit from Henry Kissinger during the Ford Administration. Then we had a visit from Rosalynn Carter during the Carter administration.

Q: How did they go?

NICHOLSON: They went well. The Kissinger visit was rather interesting in the massiveness of the entourage which accompanied it, reflective of the position in the political universe that Henry Kissinger occupied as perhaps one of the strongest, if not the strongest, Secretary of State that we've had in many, many years. It was choreographed to a ridiculous degree to the point where the written briefing scenarios, in giving directions for how to get from point A to point B, would describe how many steps down a staircase one had to go and cover every left, right, left turn. Kind of absurd. But the visit went as well as could be expected in a period when our relations with Brazil were under strain in some areas.

The Rosalynn Carter visit seemed to go well. It went better than we at the Embassy expected. We had anticipated a somewhat adverse Brazilian reaction to having the U.S. represented in ostensibly a government-to- government visit not by the President of the United States but by his wife. Particularly given Brazil's sense of itself as an emerging superpower of the Southern Hemisphere, the notion that they didn't merit a visit from the President but that they were going to receive a visit from somebody who held no official position in the U.S. government was, we thought, potentially fraught with difficulty. But from all I heard she conducted her meetings well and the Brazilians, whatever they may really have thought of the overall notion, certainly behaved properly and cordially. The visit seems to have come off reasonably well.

I should add that, at that point, I was low enough on the totem pole that I was not in a position first hand to observe many of these proceedings, so my impressions are essentially second hand. The only proceeding I observed, besides coordinating the Embassy briefing book and helping to write some of the draft toasts and thank you letters for Kissinger, was being deputized to convey his laundry in the hotel to make sure that the staff there understood that his underwear were not to be starched. By the way, my witness to history is that Henry wore boxers, not jockey underwear!

Q: Such is the nature of diplomacy.

NICHOLSON: At the junior officer level it is.

Q: You left in '77. Where did you go?

NICHOLSON: I went back to the U.S. and onto the Current Intelligence Staff of the Bureau of Intelligence and Research (INR), which among other things manned the INR counterpart of the State Department's Operations Center. At that time, you had the Operations Center which was responsible for monitoring incoming cables and alerting Department principals 24 hours a day if they needed to know of breaking events, as well as providing a kind of super switchboard for Department principals or others to get in contact with each other, wherever they might be. There also was this separate INR component linked to the Operations Center which carried out the same monitoring and alerting function with regard to all intelligence agency traffic coming in to the Department That INR staff, of which I was a part, also co-authored with the Ops Center the Secretary's Daily Morning Summary, which is a daily compendium of key breaking news items derived from both classified and open source materials, to which at that time was added several 1-2 page classified analyses of current developments written by INR area analysts.

Q: You did that for how long?

NICHOLSON: About fifteen months, which was average. It was a shift operation, with three shifts: 12 to 8, 8 to 4, and 4 to midnight, with obviously some overlap at either end with the outgoing or incoming shifts.

Q: I know that people who served in the Operations Center per se have found that it's a lot of work but the thing is they certainly learn how the State Department works. Did you get a feel for this, too?

NICHOLSON: To a certain extent, yes, although being on the intelligence side, I actually got to know better how the intelligence community works, since our part of the operation was not involved as much in what I called the “switchboard” function of the Operations Center which would tend to lend itself better to an overview of who's talking to whom and about what within the State Department itself. (end of tape)

Q: We want to go back and talk a bit about the Human Rights Report in Brazil.

NICHOLSON: As I mentioned, in Brasilia my tour spanned the Ford and Carter administrations. It was during President Carter's administration that the Human Rights Report began to be written first on certain countries and ultimately I think now on every country with which the U.S. maintains diplomatic relations and a couple with which it does not. This was a time of transition in Brazil when the regime was beginning to lighten up as part of the military's long-term strategy to go back to the barracks, although at its pace and its timetable. Thus civil society had some space in which to operate and a press which was subject to self-censorship but able between the lines or more than between the lines in many cases to put out material unfavorable or at least not in compliance with the government line. It was also a period when our relations with Brazil were in difficulty —a point of inflection. We had had very close relations with the Brazilians both before but particularly in the immediate aftermath of the 1964 military coup because the people who came to the fore of the Brazilian military and carried out that coup and thereafter led the country had been our young comrades in arms in World War II when Brazil sent an expeditionary force to Italy to fight alongside Mark Clark's forces, the only country in Latin America to send troops to fight in World War II. It was an expedition which acquitted itself well and was thus a source of great pride to the Brazilian military. So, we had excellent relations with the military dating back to those days and continuing during the years immediately after the coup. In fact, the famous story is that one of the people we sent first to Brazil in 1964 to make contact with the new leadership and in particular its military president was Vernon Walters, who was a retired U.S. military officer who had been the

liaison officer between U.S. forces and Brazilian forces in Italy during World War II. (I later met him in Portugal when the Reagan Administration sent him on a mission to Angola.) That generation, however, was passing or mostly had passed from the scene by the early '70s, to be replaced by a new group of officers who did not have the same experience and were prone towards nationalist ideologies and inspired by a view of Brazil as the coming great power of the Southern Hemisphere—which led to some tension with the United States to the extent that we were seen to be taking actions that in any way might impede Brazil's rise to glory. There were a number of those issues, most frequently in the trade field, where U.S. tariff barriers to Brazilian exports were a continuing source of tension and sparked a Brazilian hyper-reaction which reflected during that period a certain lack of maturity about such issues, treating them not simply as a question of business or domestic political interests on our side or theirs but as somehow intended to stifle Brazil. They tended to politicize trade issues to a degree which they do not any longer. That was a source of tension.

So, too, was occasional U.S. protest or expressions of discomfort with human rights abuses in Brazil. So, too, even more were our complaints to the Brazilians about their efforts to market military equipment from a burgeoning arms industry to parts of the world that we were not very comfortable with, in particular Libya and certain other countries of the Middle East which essentially were being treated as outlaw states by the U.S. and many other Western arms exporters but which therefore provided fertile fields for a Brazilian arms industry free of Western competition in those zones. Thus, Brazil, as we saw it, was running a mercantilist foreign policy predicated above all on increasing its exports as an engine of growth and a means of overcoming a chronic imbalance of payments problem. That was leading them to take actions which we thought were in some cases irresponsible. These mutual complaints or tensions under the surface really came to a head in 1976 and more particularly in 1977 because of two new events. One was U.S. attempts to block sale by the West Germans of a full nuclear fuel cycle to Brazil, to include five reactors as well as fuel fabrication and reprocessing facilities. We took

that position based on non-proliferation concerns and a fear that this package could put into the hands of the Brazilian military the means to develop nuclear weapons, which we suspected at least some of them were interested in acquiring. In historical retrospect that has proved to be correct. Elements of the military did seek and begin to put into place the beginnings of a nuclear weapons program which, following the exit of the military from power in the mid-to-late 1980s, was foresworn by the new civilian administrations. A deal was struck with Argentina, which also had pursued a nuclear weapons program, to create a mutual inspection regime for compliance with mutual renunciation of nuclear weapons - an inspection regime, by the way, which the U.S. continues to support financially. The U.S. did not succeed in blocking the sale of the reactors to Brazil but we did succeed in persuading the West Germans not to provide cutting edge plutonium reprocessing equipment (actually I believe it was centrifuge technology for uranium enrichment). This made the Brazilian government extremely unhappy. It was viewed again, at least on the surface, as a U.S. attempt to maintain Brazilian energy dependence and as thwarting Brazil in its effort to reduce chronic balance of payments problems which to a considerable degree (in the immediate aftermath of the '73 Middle East War) were a consequence of burgeoning oil import costs, which the nuclear plants were intended to reduce.

The other event in that period which set us at loggerheads and led to a turning point was the publication of the Human Rights Report. This was the first time the U.S. had prepared and published Human Rights Reports. Therefore, it was inevitably going to be hard for governments to take because they hadn't been inured to these yet. I was the person along with Ambassador Crimmins who through an iterative process with Washington edited and honed an initial draft which had been written in the State Department on the Brazilian human rights situation. As I have said before, to the extent we could moderate the language, make it less bruising to the Brazilians while maintaining basic intellectual honesty, we did so. One might even say we bent over backward to do so, knowing that as the first of this kind of report, it might well draw some reaction. Indeed it did. We delivered the report to the Foreign Ministry on a Friday consistent with the ethic which has prevailed

ever since, which is that the host government receive the report at least one working day before its public release, which was to be on a Monday by the State Department in Washington, so that the government in question is not totally blindsided. The report went over there. I happened to be in the embassy on Saturday morning - perhaps I was the duty officer that weekend - when I got a panicked call from the Foreign Ministry's duty officer there. They were desperate to get hold of Ambassador Crimmins. We finally tracked him down. He was duly summoned over to the Foreign Ministry so that on that Saturday, maybe by then it was Sunday, the Brazilian foreign minister or deputy foreign minister could take this document and throw it back in his lap and declare that “We have not officially received this” and essentially say it was a document that they would not deign to receive, although obviously they had poured over it and no doubt photocopies were floating around the Foreign Ministry by then. So they were in high dudgeon about this. The issue reverberated further. Precisely because Brazil was in this transition stage, I think a U.S. Human Rights Report made more of a difference there than it did in most countries at the time. Those countries which were absolutely repressive dictatorships would never let the report see the light of day in their own societies. While we in the West would know about it and it might be circulated in limited fashion underground in the host country through dissident groups, it would have no wide currency in those states. In states which were democracies, the report might have a small critique here or there, but basically it was not relevant. It was simply endorsing the existing institutional structure. But Brazil was in between. Brazil had a government that wanted to move in the right direction but wanted to move slowly and at its own pace. It had a press which was semi-free, semi-controlled, and which used the opportunity of the Human Rights Report to make points among civil society, which is to say that the major Brazilian newspapers, the “O Estado de Sao Paulo,” and I believe also in Rio the “Jornal do Brasil,” within a day or two published the entire text of the U.S. Human Rights Report with all the dirty linen that we had to offer presented to their readership numbering in the hundreds of thousands, if not the millions. That in turn initiated comments in the press back and forth. They could get away with this presumably on the grounds that they were not saying these things themselves; they were

simply reporting a news event in the form of the U.S. Human Rights Report. But it made the government very unhappy. Suddenly they had a major critical element introduced into the body politic and discussions which tended to push the process of regime relaxation a little further and a little faster than they would have liked. It obviously did not change things from day to night, but it had a certain impact.

As a result of those two issues—our effort to block the nuclear sale from West Germany and the open criticism before millions of its own people of the Brazilian government through the Human Rights Report—our relations underwent a significant downturn. The Brazilians kicked out one of our military missions and downgraded their military to military contacts with us. That was the beginning of a certain distancing or estrangement between the two military establishments that has persisted to this day. It was an inflection point in the context of a Brazilian military which, as I mentioned earlier, was already moving away from its wartime “little brother” relationship with the U.S. and in some quarters taking a view of the U.S. as perhaps no longer a friend but instead an adversary of Brazil's rise in the Southern Hemisphere.

Q: Was it in retrospect you saw this or were you seeing some of these developments while you were there?

NICHOLSON: The initial impact of extreme Brazilian government unhappiness with our effort to block the reactor sale and with the Human Rights Report was evident from the beginning. The Brazilian decision to kick out one of our military missions took place within a few months thereafter and the downgrading of regular military to military relations also within a few months. That this was going to set the pattern for decades thereafter is something one saw only in retrospect. It's interesting. We made the argument to the Brazilians at the time that they were buying a white elephant in undertaking this reactor purchase from the Germans. It turned out we were right. I later served in Brazil during 1998 to 2000 as the Embassy Counselor for Environmental, Scientific, and Technological Affairs and made a field trip down to the Rio area to see one of these nuclear plants. The

original deal called for the purchase of five of them. Twenty years later, the Brazilians had still not finished construction of the first one, which they were hoping to bring on line in another few months and maybe have by now. By that time, they had given up the idea of constructing any of the other four with the possible exception of one more for which they already had had in country for many years hundreds of millions of dollars worth of hardware and equipment sitting around ready to be assembled, and which they now considered building simply in order to provide employment for a continuing cadre of nuclear industry experts lest they lose the human capital essential if Brazil wants in the future to undertake nuclear power in a major way. But the Brazil/German project had turned out to be a white elephant in part because of technical difficulties, and in part because of recurrent Brazilian financial crises which forced suspension of work but did not lead to the suspension of enormous amounts of interest accruing on the loans that they had taken with the West Germans to finance the deal. So in the end the power from the one (perhaps eventually two) reactors coming out of that deal is going to turn out to be per kilowatt hour probably the highest cost energy in the history of mankind when one takes into consideration all the debt service, the repayment on the loans, and so on.

Q: Maybe this would be a good place to stop after ;you returned from Brazil?

NICHOLSON: Okay.

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Q: Today is September 25, 2003. What part of INR were you dealing with?

NICHOLSON: I was on what was called the Current Intelligence Staff, also known as the INR Watch Office, which by day sifted through all the intelligence traffic and wire service ticker coming in to the Department and alerted Department officials who needed to know and kept INR analysts apprised of developments they might need to react to on short notice in producing articles for the Secretary's Daily Morning Summary, which came out around 6:00 AM each morning and reflected developments over the previous 24 hours.

The Current Intelligence team also staffed the INR component of the Operations Center. We had one or two people there most of the time and overnight the Current Intelligence Staff in toto shifted up there and worked in tandem with the Ops Center people—partly in alerting Department officials to intelligence traffic items of urgency, and also as co-authors and editors of the Morning Summary.

Q: It shows how it evolved. I was in INR and two of us were delegated to come in at 4:00 AM and read traffic and that was about the extent of it in those days.

Did you get any feel for the relative weight, merit, value of the intelligence coming in from various places (overt and covert)?

NICHOLSON: In certain countries, the component of the picture provided by our intelligence agencies was quite significant. But it varied country by country. Viewing the incoming traffic as a whole, the intelligence component probably played a less important role than standard State reporting or open source information. It was a significant and helpful addition to the picture in a number of areas but it was not really the core resource.

Q: Did you get any feel for where we had gaps and where we were particularly good? Were we doing pretty well in China?

NICHOLSON: As far as human intelligence is concerned, it's about what you would expect, which is that with regard to countries that were major adversaries and what the intelligence community considered “tough targets,” namely the Soviet Union and China, I don't think we were all that successful. To the extent that we were successful with human sources in those countries, those sources were very closely held and their reports, if any, would not have passed through general channels in State. They would have been very highly compartmented and only a few people, if any, in the Department would have seen such reports.

Q: This I would assume would include intercept traffic and stuff like that.

NICHOLSON: No, I saw virtually all the intercept traffic. I was earlier referring to useful human sources that we had managed to recruit in the Soviet Union or in China. From what I gather from open source reading, those were rare finds and they were protected accordingly. So, what I'm saying is, I don't think there was a great deal of human-source intelligence coming out of those countries, but to the extent there was it would not have passed within my ken and I doubt more than a handful of people in the Department would have received it. As you would expect, the intelligence tended to be better with regard to certain Third World countries with less sophisticated security systems and counterintelligence systems, and perhaps with less ideological commitment. There in some cases you could find quite interesting and insightful reporting from the human-source intelligence side, and I saw all or most of it.

Q: Did you get involved in any particular incident or task that sticks out in your mind?

NICHOLSON: Not offhand. A concluding note. It's my impression, having been in a number of countries over a period of time, that from a consumer's standpoint the Central Intelligence Agency's ability to collect human-source intelligence on political topics declined significantly in the '80s and '90s partly due to budget cuts and partly to de-emphasis on HUMINT as they call it, which has now become a subject of great debate in the wake of 9/11 and the apparent dearth of good sources of human intelligence in the Middle East. Now the hue and cry has gone up for Arabic speakers and greater emphasis on that. But one could see the decline and also see a shift in intelligence collection interest after the Cold War from a focus on political-strategic topics to some of the transnational concerns, especially drug-trafficking, which have emerged over the last two decades.

Q: Where did you go in '79?

NICHOLSON: I went into an office in the Political-Military Affairs Bureau called DCA which had responsibility for backstopping strategic arms control negotiations and in particular the strategic arms limitation talks with the Soviet Union which were then nearing completion

of a SALT II treaty. I worked on that for about a year or so, by which time the treaty was concluded after something on the order of seven or eight years of negotiations. My remaining time in DCA was devoted to helping the effort, ultimately unsuccessful, to obtain Senate ratification of the treaty and—on the assumption SALT II would eventually be implemented—to examining options and potential areas to address in a follow-on SALT III negotiation.

Q: When did you come on the scene into DCA?

NICHOLSON: That would have been in the late summer or fall of '79.

Q: Things were moving along and then all of a sudden you had the double blow for us. One was the seizing of our embassy, which really didn't have anything to do with arms control. But the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan just stopped everything cold. When you all faced that, did you see this as being, "Oh, my God, there goes what we've been working on?"

NICHOLSON: No, because the SALT II negotiations seemed to have a kind of resistance to the daily ups and downs or even the monthly ups and downs. It went to the core of both countries' security and therefore they were prepared to proceed irrespective of what might be going on in this or that region. To the extent that these situations raised tensions internationally or between the two countries, it probably only underlined the value of attempting to secure these arms limitation agreements because they were not really so much about arms limitation—at least up through the SALT II treaty, they didn't achieve much at all in the way of actual reductions in arms—but about creating a predictability on each side as to what the other's arsenal would look like and over time trying to tailor the mix of weapons systems in a way that would be more stabilizing and less on a hair trigger. These negotiations were really as much about mutual security and avoidance of nuclear war by accident or panic on one side or another, as they were about nuclear reductions. Both countries had an overwhelming stake in seeing those negotiations go forward.

Q: You ran across the Senate. Was that the problem?

NICHOLSON: Yes. The treaty encountered considerable opposition in the Senate. As always in any arms control negotiation, there are those who argue that you gave away more than you got. And there were those who basically were reflexively ideologically opposed to the notion of arms limitation agreements and therefore prepared to take a dim view of the balance achieved by a treaty no matter what the realities might have been. This, too, was an agreement which had been negotiated under a Democratic administration or at least had been brought to fruition by a Democratic administration, the Carter administration, of which conservatives took a very dim view in terms of its alleged weakness in international affairs of the sort which supposedly encouraged the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. So they were prepared to believe the worst about the balance of the treaty deal that this administration had brought to conclusion.

Q: In that regard was there a palpable split between the Pentagon and the State Department?

NICHOLSON: In the negotiations the USG had an interagency committee that backstopped the negotiations, determined the U.S. positions on some issues, and on larger issues either arrived at a consensus recommendation or defined alternative options to send up the line for decision at higher level, typically by the Deputy Secretaries of the various agencies involved or if necessary up to Cabinet level and the President. On that committee, which was chaired by the National Security Council staff, you had representatives of the State Department, of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and of the civilian component at DOD, namely the Office of the Secretary of Defense, and you also had a representative of the CIA there at least nominally not in a policy capacity but in the role of an information resource. In terms of positions taken on various issues, one typically found ACDA at one end of the spectrum. For lack of a better term, we'll say the left or liberal end of the spectrum. You found the Joint Chiefs at the other end of the spectrum. In the middle, relatively speaking, you found

the State Department and the Office of the Secretary of Defense (OSD), with State slightly left of center and OSD slightly right of center. That's how the positions tended to break down on most of the issues that arose, with the result that the eventual consensus on decisions that carried the day was a melding of the State and Defense positions— kind of in the middle of the road. That was true of SALT II. I gather that in the strategic arms negotiations during the '80s when the Reagan administration took office and installed a strong conservative as head of ACDA, suddenly ACDA, which during the Carter period had been at the left end of the spectrum, found itself almost to the right of the Joint Chiefs of Staff in these interagency meetings, an interesting flipping of roles. But during the SALT II negotiations, the lineup was as I stated.

Q: You were the new boy on the block. Was there a feeling in ACDA that the SALT agreement which was being finalized was a pretty good one?

NICHOLSON: Yes, they were strongly behind it both in substance but also because it reflected the mission of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency. They were certainly supportive of it, as indeed was the interagency community in general.

Q: What were you doing during this time?

NICHOLSON: Doing analyses and supporting the State representatives on the interagency SALT II committees and on occasion acting as the State representative, although less frequently because in those days I was fairly junior.

Q: Did you get involved in trying to sell it to the Senate?

NICHOLSON: I was involved in doing a lot of the documentation, helping with preparation of testimony and a million Qs and As either on a contingency basis for use by Department principals testifying or in response to senatorial inquiries and requests for answers to lists of questions, some of which were meant to elicit information and others of which frankly,

then as now, are used as a tool by opponents to badger an administration. That involved a lot of work behind the scenes.

Q: You continued doing this until when?

NICHOLSON: Essentially until I left. The treaty was never ratified. It just slowly went into a kind of limbo. But that point had not been reached by the time I went on to another assignment.

Q: Was there a certain point where all of you realized that, gee, the apogee has been reached and it's starting to go down and the chances of something happening on this at least in the near future are pretty poor?

NICHOLSON: Yes. As people began to count votes and more and more senators took public positions, it became clearer that we didn't have 67 votes and were not likely to obtain them for a considerable period, if ever. I don't think people gave up, but certainly a degree of pessimism set in among some.

Q: Who were some of the principals when you were there in the bureau?

NICHOLSON: The Assistant Secretary heading the Politico-Military Affairs Bureau was Leslie Gelb, who had come over from being a correspondent on political and military affairs for the “New York Times.” The head of my office was Mark Palmer, a splendid fellow, who subsequently went on to become an ambassador in Eastern Europe and retired from the Department and has since been in private business.

Q: How did you find the atmosphere of the place when you arrived? Pretty upbeat?

NICHOLSON: Yes, because on the one hand the SALT II negotiations were progressing and on the other there were also negotiations either planned or in progress on intermediate range nuclear weapons in Europe, which involved another office in the Politico-Military Affairs Bureau. We were very much at the cutting edge of some major

developments. People tend to become more excited and enthusiastic about their work when it's perceived as being important and among the top items on the national agenda.

Q: Was there a cleaning up of the draft treaty between the U.S. and the Soviets during this period?

NICHOLSON: What happens typically in these negotiations, or at least in the SALT negotiations, is that the two sides initially come out with diametrically opposed positions and then test each other's resolve with back and forth that can last for years. It can take a couple years to get from Article 2 to Article 3. A glacial progress is typical as the two sides try to see where the weak points, where the “give” points are, what the other side's bottom line is. Of course, each side would like the final treaty to come as close to the other's bottom line as possible, the better to maximize its own advantage. Then over a long period, major issues slowly get resolved. But there are still a large number of outstanding and significant issues that the two parties in essence are kind of holding back. What you have then in the end game of a negotiation like this, say in the last six months to a year and a half, is a sudden acceleration of the process as the two sides come to the conclusion that it's time to wind it up. They by now have a sense of what the limits are to the other side's flexibility. Then they start in earnest horse trading among the remaining major issues, and you see a pace of decision-making and the falling into place of these pieces that is quite dramatic compared to the glacial slogging that characterized the previous years. In that sense, it's “cleaning up” as you termed it, but it's not a cleaning up of details. It's a cleaning up of some major points still in contention. I was fortunate to have come into this process at just the time when that acceleration was happening and there was a sense of real progress and drama. Those who participated in the process several years earlier would have come away with a very different impression—of steady but not terribly productive work, going at it day after day but not making dramatic headway.

Q: Did you have any particular part of the thing or was yours more of a general overview?

NICHOLSON: It was general in the sense that our office at State dealt with all aspects of the treaty. It was not divided up among different persons or groups. The same people were working on the same articles, which could be any article of the treaty or provision or issue which was left unresolved.

Q: Was it a pretty integrated staff, military and State and CIA?

NICHOLSON: Not integrated organizationally, because what you had was an interagency negotiation with each agency taking a view as to where we ought to come down on an issue, which was then either resolved by consensus and/or bucked up for final decision-making at higher levels. That's typical of the way most issues are resolved in the interagency process, although because the stakes were high in this negotiation, more decisions went up to the Presidential level or the Cabinet level. It has been said in jest but certainly with truth that in an endeavor like this, the U.S. government does as much negotiating with itself as it does with its foreign negotiating partner, in this case the Soviets. These were keenly felt issues.

Q: Was there the feeling that the Soviets were going through the same practice, too?

NICHOLSON: It's hard to say. The Soviet negotiators were guarded in their comments, and that would have extended to any comments suggesting a division in their ranks. There were occasional hints that the military was being difficult. But you were never quite sure when that was a genuine statement of the facts, as versus intended to play the good cop-bad cop role or to convince you that the U.S. ought to cede off its position because it was insisting on something that the Soviet civilians supposedly could never sell to their military. But the other impression one had was that the Soviet negotiators had less knowledge than we did of their own strategic position and how many warheads and how many missiles they had and where. Sometimes what we had to say about that in the negotiations was instructive to them, by which one infers that they were kept on a pretty short leash and somewhat in the dark by their superiors in Moscow, the Foreign Ministry or the Soviet

military, which I suspect carried a greater weight on their side than did the U.S. military on ours, although obviously the U.S. military was a major player.

Q: Did we say, as we often do in other negotiations, "I'd love to agree with you, but this would never get through the Senate," which is a good guy-bad guy type thing?

NICHOLSON: Yes, I think that was employed from time to time.

Q: Where did you go after this? You left in '81?

NICHOLSON: I left in '81.

Q: When did you leave in '81?

NICHOLSON: Actually, I left in December of 1980. I went to Lisbon, Portugal, to serve as a political officer at the embassy there.

Q: Did you get any feel just before you left in December of '80 about the transition? What was the feeling about the Reagan administration coming in? It was considered a right-wing administration more than most. Was there a feeling of, "Oh, my God, he's going to break all the crockery?"

NICHOLSON: I think there was a concern. It wasn't necessarily my concern. At the time, I was a Republican. In fact, I voted for Reagan. But I know my colleagues were concerned about possible policy shifts and concerned as well because the Reagan administration through its campaign rhetoric and some of its early moves suggested that it was likely to politicize the upper ranks of the State Department more than had been the case in previous administrations, that the balance of political appointees versus career professionals would shift quite significantly. That gave people an institutional anxiety over and above their worries that the administration might make a radical break with previous U.S. foreign policy.

Q: How did the Lisbon appointment come about?

NICHOLSON: They had a vacancy in December, which is not the best time to be trying to fill a position. I had Portuguese from my Brazilian experience, and when I became aware of the possibility the folks in the PM Bureau were very good about letting me go a few months earlier than would otherwise have been the case in order that I could take this opportunity.

Q: You were in Portugal from '81 to when?

NICHOLSON: I arrived in December '80 and left in the late Fall, probably close to December, of '83.

Q: What was the situation in that period, relations between the U.S. and Portugal?

NICHOLSON: They were very close because we had been very active in the period immediately following the Portuguese revolution of 1974 in which far leftist and communist forces staked out a significant political position. We had helped the democratic parties, particularly the Socialists, to stave off the imposition of any kind of left-wing authoritarian regime and to put the country on the track towards a stable functioning democratic system. After the Socialists lost elections the Social Democrats came into office, and although our previous relations with them had not been so close as with the Socialists because they were really not key to stabilizing the situation in the immediate post-'74 period, we nonetheless had good relations with the country and continued to support strongly the consolidation of the democratic movement and democratic government. The process was quite well along by the time I arrived, but there were still some thresholds to be crossed.

Q: Who was our ambassador at the time?

NICHOLSON: The ambassador when I arrived was Richard Bloomfield, who had formerly been posted as ambassador in Ecuador. He was succeeded in Lisbon by H. Allen Holmes,

who served during the last two years I was there. This was a period in which we were involved with the Portuguese in the renegotiation of the Lajes Base Agreement, which is a linchpin of the relationship given the strategic importance to the U.S. military of Lajes as a mid-Atlantic and reliably available military air base, especially for Middle East contingencies. Additionally in this period, we were cooperating with the Portuguese as part of U.S. efforts to negotiate a solution to problems in southern Africa, namely an attempt by the Reagan administration to work out an agreement by which the Cuban Expeditionary Force then in Angola would withdraw in return for a South African withdrawal of military forces from Namibia, which was then a South African dependency bordering Angola. Because the Portuguese as the former colonial power in Angola were knowledgeable of the situation on the ground and of the personalities and had a stake of their own in stabilizing the area, we had fairly close consultations with them. I was involved in that. I was not doing Lajes negotiations. I and a couple colleagues in the Political Section were also engaged in reporting on domestic political events, which absorbed considerable time and attention because Portugal had only recently emerged from the post-revolutionary period of political turmoil and there were still some institutional hurdles to be overcome in finally normalizing democratic functioning there. I focused on the Social Democratic Party, which was the lead governing party at the time. I suspect the fine points of domestic politics in that country would be of lesser interest to us nowadays.

Q: We had been close to the point where Henry Kissinger was talking about writing off the Portuguese. The clash between Kissinger and Frank Carlucci, our ambassador, was really a classic in American diplomacy and a rather key point at that time. Where are we going? Are we going to turn our backs on anybody who flirts with Eurocommunism or not? We got ourselves actively engaged and came out on top. How did the political parties fall? Where were the Communists in the mix at that time?

NICHOLSON: First, since you mentioned Carlucci, I should say that the period of U.S. debate over whether we should write off Portugal or stay engaged to work for a better outcome, was over by the time I arrived. But Frank Carlucci remained virtually a national

hero in Portugal, an almost mythic figure for what he had accomplished and for the very hands-on and activist role that he had played. And he is still very highly regarded by most Portuguese.

At that time, the Communist Party, which had perhaps 15-20 percent of the vote and was very significant in the union movement, was—along with the French Communist Party — one of the very few Communist parties in Western Europe which were still hardline Stalinist, and it was under the direction of a longtime communist “grand old man” and very hardline ideologue named Alvaro Cunhal. So the Portuguese Communist Party was quite unregenerate. There were three other major parties: the Socialist Party, the Social Democratic Party, and the Christian Democratic Party. They were roughly parallel in their attitudes to what you would find in parties of similar label elsewhere in Europe except that in the Portuguese case, each party was about a half step to the right of its European counterparts. The dominant element of the Socialist Party in Portugal really was almost Social Democratic, while the Social Democratic Party spanned the divide between social democracy and European liberalism. And finally, the Christian Democratic Party (CDS) had a modern Christian Democratic element to it but it also had within its ranks fairly right-wing elements including some who had been associated with the Salazar regime and really had no place else to go and so ended up in the CDS. The Social Democrats were the governing party when I was there, in coalition with the CDS as a junior partner.

Q: Who was the prime minister?

NICHOLSON: Francisco Sa Carneiro had engineered a Social Democratic victory over the Socialist Party a year or so earlier, but he died in a plane crash about one week after I arrived and was succeeded by Francisco Pinto Balsemao. Balsemao was prime minister during the rest of my time in Portugal.

Q: From our observation, how close and how effective were the ties between the Portuguese parties and the socialist parties in France and Germany? How did the latter fit in?

NICHOLSON: The Portuguese socialists had good ties with the French and German socialists in part because they received institutional support and backing from the Socialist International, in which the French and the German socialists played key roles. Moreover, West Germany years earlier had developed political foundations linked to its major political parties, which operated abroad to provide support and training to democratic parties of a similar ideological leaning. (We later copied their model in establishing the Endowment for Democracy, with its Republican Party and Democratic Party foundations.) The German socialists had such a foundation active in Portugal supporting the Portuguese socialists. Similarly, the German Liberal Party had a foundation that was linked to the Portuguese Social Democrats. The other reason the ties were close is because, particularly among the Portuguese socialists, some of their leaders had been exiles during the Salazar regime and had spent considerable periods in France. That included the leader of the Socialist Party, Mario Soares.

Q: Even with the Reagan administration, were we comfortable with these socialist regimes?

NICHOLSON: Yes. There may have been an initial period - it's hard to say because I was not in Washington - of hesitancy about “socialists” and what that meant, but that very rapidly dissipated and we continued to have excellent relations with the various political parties, including the Socialists. But I would note that at the time the Reagan administration came in, the Socialist Party in Portugal was the opposition and the Social Democrats governed in alliance with the Christian Democrats.

Q: How did you find access as a political officer?

NICHOLSON: It was excellent, perhaps to an unusual degree, precisely because of the very active and supportive role we had played towards the major democratic political parties in Portugal during the period after the revolution and because, although they were beginning to gain confidence at the time, there was a continuing need on their part for reassurance that they had backing from the international community for their continued efforts to consolidate democracy. And so the doors were always open. Access was very easy to obtain with the exception of the Communist Party, which was not interested in talking to us, and vice versa.

Q: In a way, you might say the Portuguese were blessed by having a hardline communist/ Stalinist type party, which doesn't allow for much expansion, particularly as one witnessed with the new Eurocommunist phenomenon, as with Berlinguer and others in Italy. The communists there were making strides in putting on a different face and being more with it.

NICHOLSON: That's exactly true. The Portuguese Communist Party essentially painted themselves into a corner, isolated themselves, and over time and particularly after I departed their percentage of the vote in elections continually declined to the point where now I think it's in single digits, whereas it was well into double digits when I was there.

Q: We weren't making overtures to them, but were you able to pick up indications of disquiet in the rank and file of communists?

NICHOLSON: Not while I was there because again, being a very Stalinist party, the notion of central authority and unquestioning obedience to the powers that be, the Central Committee, was strong. And you had the hardline figure of Alvaro Cunhal, who had a great deal of prestige within their ranks and a long history of resistance to the Salazar dictatorship as an exile or otherwise. So, one did not detect much disquiet and certainly no open protest within the Communist Party at that time about the predicament in which it was placing itself.

Q: Did events in Spain play any role?

NICHOLSON: No, not at that time. Franco was already dead. The Spanish were on their own track towards a democratic system. The broader issue between the Portuguese and the Spanish always has been Portuguese anxiety about being swallowed up by a larger neighbor. In fact, Portugal was under Spanish control for some 60 years, 1580 to 1640, when Philip II asserted his right of inheritance to the throne after a Portuguese dynasty died out. And Portugal won its original independence some 900 years ago against the Spanish. So there has always been this reaching out on the part of the Portuguese to other powers for alliances outside continental Europe which they can use to buttress their toehold on the Iberian Peninsula. England was the great friend of the 18th and the 19th centuries and the U.S. has played that role since World War II. In the modern era, water rights are a potential issue between Portugal and Spain. They share watershed and the sources of many Portuguese rivers are in the Spanish hinterland. Another issue is Portuguese fear of Spanish economic dominance. The Portuguese even now express concern that the admission of both countries to the European Community dictated the end of barriers to movement of capital and labor across their borders, and as a result Spanish firms are becoming very significant players in the Portuguese economy, in essence by buying out a lot of Portuguese companies. So, this question of sovereignty and survival as an independent entity has always colored the Portuguese attitude towards Spain, which is not necessarily one of hostility nowadays, but always one of wariness. We saw this reflected very much, for instance, in the course of the Lajes Base negotiations, when one issue that was of great concern to the Portuguese was that they retain their defense responsibility in NATO for a portion of the Atlantic Ocean between mainland Portugal and the Azores Islands, under what was called the IBERLANT command. The latter was headed by a Portuguese general officer in tandem or in liaison with an American. The Portuguese were very concerned that that zone remain under their responsibility, not Spain's, which in turn meant that in the negotiations they were very concerned to get enough military assistance from us to be able to field a naval presence sufficient to carry

out their IBERLANT responsibilities, for fear that otherwise NATO would turn to Spain to do the job. They made much more of the issue than it really warranted, because in large measure their fears about IBERLANT were unfounded, but that again was a reflection of angst over somehow losing “terrain” even if it was international waters, or in some way losing a degree of their independence from the Spanish.

Q: How about the Brazil connection?

NICHOLSON: It is and was remarkably marginal. When I went to Portugal, I expected to find much more of an interchange between the two countries, given a common history going back hundreds of years until Brazil achieved its independence in the early 19th century. But I saw very little of that. There was very little economic exchange. There was not very much cultural exchange. There was people to people movement but the dominant orientation of the Portuguese in terms of migrant workers, trade patterns, and cultural exchange was with Europe and not with South America. That surprised me.

Q: Going more on hearsay than any actual knowledge, I would think that the Brazilian personality, which is rather flamboyant and all that, and the rather dour Portuguese one, would be a bit like oil and water.

NICHOLSON: Yes, and there were jokes which reflected stereotypes. The Brazilian jokes about the Portuguese are not unlike the old Polish jokes which are essentially meant to paint the person as, if not a clod, at least rather slow moving or slow witted. I'm not quite sure whether the Portuguese pay enough attention to the Brazilians to have developed a repertoire of jokes about them, but the national personalities are very different.

Q: Somehow Carmen Miranda does not seem very Portuguese.

NICHOLSON: No, although be it said that she was born in Portugal, though she moved with her parents to Brazil as a baby. The Portuguese are much less flamboyant than the Brazilians. They are fairly conservative, nose to the grindstone people. They can generate

a certain level of passion from time to time, but they lack this constant effervescence that's characteristic of the Brazilians.

Q: What about the Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and thereabouts connection? Also San Francisco.

NICHOLSON: Yes. There are major Portuguese communities in Massachusetts, particularly Fall River and New Bedford, in Rhode Island, in New Jersey such as in the Newark area, in California, and even in Hawaii. A lot of them, perhaps even a majority, are of Azorean derivation rather than mainland Portuguese, since Azoreans were recruited by U.S. whaling ships in the 19th century. The emigrants in general were and are a major interest group and theme in Portuguese politics - number one because there are a lot of them. When I was in Portugal, which is a country of about 10 million people, there were some 800,000 Portuguese guest workers in France, at least several hundred thousand in Germany, and a large community (perhaps 400-500,000) in South Africa, the latter being not so much temporary workers but people who had permanently migrated there, including a large component who moved from neighboring Angola and Mozambique after the sudden end of Portuguese colonialism there in 1974-5. In addition, there were other not insignificant emigrant communities dotted elsewhere in Europe and the Western Hemisphere. So, this is a country that had a very large diaspora and thus the welfare of Portuguese emigrants was a significant issue and got a lot of attention, and I know that the emigrants in the United States not infrequently received visits from Portuguese politicians because they had the right of absentee voting at least in the Portuguese presidential elections and I believe to a degree also in the parliamentary elections. In particular, you would have the heads of the island autonomous regions of the Azores and of Madeira from time to time making political whistle stops through New Bedford or Fall River.

Q: Did you have the feeling that Portugal was reaching an economic takeoff?

NICHOLSON: Not to the same degree as Spain. It's been interesting to see how much more dynamic the Spanish economy and growth has been than is the case in Portugal. Part of that may be a greater entrepreneurial spirit. Part of it could be simply the issue of scali.e., the Spanish have a lot more resources to put into projects than the Portuguese do and thus to accelerate economic progress. But when I was there, Portugal was preparing to enter the European Community and the governments, both the Socialists who initiated the process of membership application to the European Community and the Social Democrats—indeed all the democratic parties—clearly saw admission to the EC as important to Portugal's economic future but also as another very powerful way of guaranteeing the irreversibility of democratic politics in Portugal by enmeshing Portugal in so many institutions of democratic Europe and giving it a stake in them, that the notion of going back either to a dictatorship of the right or—what was a greater concern—some form of left-wing authoritarianism, would become impossible. So they all pushed it very strongly. And Portugal after its candidacy was approved began to benefit from EC funding designed to improve infrastructure and other institutions to better prepare the country to come into the Community and be able to compete reasonably well once transitional arrangements were eliminated and Portugal would be fully exposed to European movements of capital, labor, merchandise, and so on. The result was that a fair amount got done in terms of infrastructure in Portugal. In particular, the freeway system—which was almost non-existent when I was there—is now countrywide and extremely impressive. During my tour there, apart from a couple short stretches of freeway, what you typically encountered were two-lane highways, and in a country two-thirds of which is quite mountainous, those roads were often curvy, you couldn't pass very easily, and it took a long time to get anywhere. Driving from Lisbon to Oporto would take you perhaps 10 hours or so. You can do it now in three. So Portugal benefited from that superhighway system and some other investments. I have not served there since the '80s, but I've visited from time to time and have Portuguese friends, so I continue to be generally abreast of things there. One thing I know is that there since has been a lot of debate and complaint to the effect that the governments of the time in the '80s and early '90s did not take as much advantage of

the EC funding as they could have, that they did not absorb as much as they could and should have, and therefore Portugal lost some opportunities. But certainly it has received some significant infrastructure benefits. But now it faces open borders at least to its EC neighbors and to a certain degree a form of economic colonialism or expansion on the part of the Spanish.

Q: On that subject, at the time you were there, had the Portuguese gone in a different direction than the Spanish? The Spanish had from the '60s or so sort of allowed the Germans and the Brits to buy up their coast. They had allowed foreigners to buy a lot of property. It was not very popular after they saw the effects of this. Did this happen in Portugal when you were there?

NICHOLSON: Yes, it did. It had already happened by the time I was there. In the '60s and '70s, just as you had the phenomenon of European, particularly Northern and Central European, investment in apartments and houses in Spain for summer warm beach vacations or to enjoy a respite from the mist and gloom of winter, so you had exactly the same phenomenon going on in the Algarve region of southern Portugal, which doesn't face on the Mediterranean but is along the Atlantic just beyond the Straits of Gibraltar and thus a pretty sunny place. There was the same kind of development and the lack of effective zoning and a lot of tacky architecture going up which spoiled a good part of that coast.

Q: You got involved in the Angolan situation? What were you doing and what were the issues?

NICHOLSON: The issues in essence were how to bring along the Angolan government to an agreement to do without a Cuban expeditionary force numbering some 15-20,000 troops which Castro had provided to that government to help them fight off an ethnic insurgency, namely the UNITA insurgency which had flared virtually from the moment the Portuguese left in '74/'75, and which at one time or another enjoyed covert support from the West and from South Africa given the Angolan government's Marxist credentials and

affiliation with the Soviet Union. We were engaged in negotiations with Angola typically involving trips down to Luanda through Lisbon by Frank Wisner, then the Deputy Assistant Secretary in the Africa Bureau, while the Assistant Secretary, Chester Crocker, worked on the South African side of the problem, attempting to persuade them to withdraw forces from Namibia if they could be assured that they wouldn't face a Cuban expeditionary force over the border. So that was the “grand bargain” envisaged....and ultimately achieved. We worked with the Portuguese seeking their good offices where possible with the Angolan government because they retained contacts with that government - in fact, they certainly saw the MPLA, even if Marxist, as more reliable and better for Portugal's long-term interests than UNITA, because the MPLA leadership were more urban-based than UNITA's and many had been educated in Portugal and thus were presumed to be more likely to look to Portugal as a future partner in economic and other matters. We consulted the Portuguese and sought their advice on various points as we engaged that MPLA leadership. Some of their insights were helpful, but I ended up concluding that the whole of their knowledge was less than the sum of the parts. Portuguese society, both within and outside government, had many ties, including personal ties, to Angola and thus potential windows on the situation there, but the Portuguese government lacked the analytical or intelligence apparatus to collect and synthesize those many different insights into as deep an understanding of the situation there as might have been possible.

Q: Was there much of an #migr# Pieds Noir community from Mozambique and Angola in Portugal?

NICHOLSON: Yes, there was to an extent. Quite a number after '74 emigrated to South Africa but many came back to Portugal and tended, as was the case with the French colonial emigres from Algeria, to be very much on the conservative side of the spectrum and somewhat embittered. Some were embittered not only with the political left in Portugal, which was in power when the country had rapidly decolonized after the overthrow of Salazar; but also—especially those on the hard right—with the United States, which was perceived as not having backed Portugal when its colonial empire was under

international challenge. Indeed, the United States eventually had taken a position in favor of decolonization and that earned us the enmity of some of the hard right and particularly the ex-Salazarists, who believed that Portugal had been playing a role in Africa as a bulwark against communism and that the U.S. had come down on the wrong side and in so doing helped to cost Portugal its empire.

Q: Apparently on Angola, one of the delights from the intelligence point of view was that, if you wanted to find out where the Cubans were, aerial photography would show up baseball diamonds. A baseball diamond is unique, whereas soccer fields are all over the place. A rough baseball diamond out in the pampas or something like that would let you know where the Cubans were.

Did Africa policy play much of a role in our relations with Portugal? We were having this constructive engagement, which was just at its beginning, with South Africa. What were you getting from your Portuguese...

NICHOLSON: I think the Portuguese welcomed our dialogue and consultations with them on Angola. At one point, with strong support by Frank Wisner, we also sought to develop a trilateral assistance arrangement whereby USAID would work in partnership with its Portuguese counterpart on projects in former Portuguese colonies, with initial focus on Guinea Bissau, the thought being that we had more resources but the Portuguese had a lot of human expertise and experience in those areas and that combining the two could be a helpful synergy. The Portuguese welcomed such collaboration because it was a way of leveraging their own limited resources in order to continue to play a role in Lusophone Africa. And they welcomed the role that they were playing—to the limited extent they were—in our negotiations with the Angolans and the South Africans as a kind of friend at court to both the United States and the MPLA government in Angola. So, overall, Africa played a positive role in our relations with Portugal.

In the end, by the way, those trilateral aid arrangements never really worked out. Number one, since we were putting up the largest share of the financial resources, USAID tended to insist on a dominant decision-making role and the Portuguese felt somewhat marginalized. Secondly, their overseas aid organization as a bureaucratic entity was just not geared up to move at the pace to which we were accustomed...which occasioned frustration on USAID's part and a temptation to move ahead on its own. (end of tape)

So in the end, nothing much came of that. But it's an idea which has some surface plausibility and therefore it comes up once a decade or so when a new U.S. ambassador shows up in Lisbon and reinvents the wheel and thinks this is a great new initiative that he or she can carry out. It's happened at least once and I think twice again since I left and has never really gotten off the ground.

Q: How about the Mozambique connection? This was a rather peculiar thing where you had a Marxist government, but all of a sudden we got kind of cozy with them. But did that happen at the time when you were there?

NICHOLSON: Not really, although the USG's perception of Mozambique and particularly of its President Samora Machel was always a bit more benign than our view of the MPLA government in Angola. Machel himself proved to be quite the pragmatist in the end. The Mozambicans just didn't seem to have the same hard edge as the Angolans and certainly they did not have a Cuban expeditionary force in their country. Frankly, I can't recall exactly when the thaw began to set in, but even when I was in Lisbon, there was a different USG perception of Machel's government as compared to the MPLA, or at least a nuanced perception of his government. Moreover, there was also a considerably different perception of the armed opposition to Machel. In the case of Angola, you had Savimbi and UNITA, which was an ethnically-based but, one could argue, in some sense a nationalist uprising against the MPLA government in Luanda. But essentially it was an ethnic movement more than anything else....and it had some popular support. We supported UNITA at the time. On the other hand, the armed opposition that the government in

Mozambique faced, which was called RENAMO, was a South African government creation to put pressure on Mozambique, and it engaged in particularly heinous activities and massacres of the population—not that Savimbi and UNITA didn't as well, but it was much more apparent or much better publicized in the case of RENAMO. So RENAMO was a movement in very bad odor and that, too, affected the USG view of Mozambique.

Q: You left Portugal in 1984. Where did you go then?

NICHOLSON: I went back to the Department of State and served a year as the desk officer for Portugal. That was a period when we were completing the Lajes Base negotiations, and when President Reagan visited Lisbon. But otherwise it was not a terribly dramatic period in relations and thus, like many similar country desk jobs, it entailed a little bit of this and a little bit of that across a broad spectrum of issues that arose on a day to day basis. Fairly mundane, but a good experience in learning one's way around various parts of the Department and the U.S. Government.

Q: From the end of World War II on, or maybe even before, it seems as if these base agreements follow almost a pattern. You complete one and each side is holding out and then they finally reach an agreement and then they start getting ready for the next one. It's essentially all over money, isn't it?

NICHOLSON: For the most part, yes, and that was the typical cycle in the Lajes negotiations. They would go on for a couple years and by the time you had concluded an agreement, within another two or three years you would be engaged in preparations for the next renegotiation. The level of U.S. funding for economic and military assistance was the core issue, although labor agreements with the base employees' union also could prove thorny at times. These were matters driven not only by the central Portuguese government, but also by the government of the Azores autonomous region, which was politically influential in Lisbon. The President of the Azores, Mota Amaral, was a major figure in the governing Social Democratic Party at that time. The Azores saw Lajes as a

resource - and that's not to criticize them - to be exploited for all it was worth. They tended to lean on the central government to strike harder positions and more exorbitant demands than would otherwise have been the case. And the central government always had to balance what was doable in a negotiation with the Americans, while trying to satisfy this insistent Azorean regional government which sometimes took a less realistic view of what was possible to obtain from us.

Q: Did you get a feel for... Was the Pentagon view different than the State Department view? In a way, everybody agreed on all sides that the bases were going to stay there and were going to be there.

NICHOLSON: Yes, and that was always an underlying assumption not only among American agencies but with the Portuguese as well. It was simply a matter of coming to a bottom line. I don't think there was ever the feeling that these negotiations might ultimately fail and we would pull out of the Azores because, number one, it was strategically important to us, not least because in the '73 War and before that in the '67 War in the Middle East, it had been the critical transit stop for the airlift of U.S. logistical support to Israel at a time when a number of our other European friends were not prepared to allow the use of their territory for refueling of U.S. support flights. We deemed the base important, and on the other hand the Portuguese saw it as important as a continued source of aid generated by the negotiations and as a major source of local employment.

Q: During the time you were either in Portugal or on the desk, was there ever any significant talk about the Azores becoming independent?

NICHOLSON: No. There had been at one time or another some fringe movements in the Azores on behalf of independence but they never galvanized the population. The Portuguese state was quite astute after the Revolution in conveying a very significant degree of autonomy to both the Azores and to the island of Madeira in the Atlantic, as well as a share of national government revenue that on a per capita basis probably well

exceeded what mainland Portuguese were getting from their government. So the regional autonomous governments of the Azores and of Madeira had a very good thing going and still do and have every interest in maintaining the status quo. That, I suppose, is even more the case now that Portugal is a member of the European Community.

Q: What about the Reagan visit? A presidential visit is the equivalent to an earthquake in an area, but the desk officer also feels results of this.

NICHOLSON: As you say, the visit entailed a great deal of effort both substantively and logistically. It went well. The one thing that I recall with some amusement is that Ronald Reagan was noted as being perhaps a concept person but not a detail person, someone who had firm convictions and set the main lines of policy but did not have much of a grasp of details and probably didn't want them. This was reflected in the standing instructions for State with regard to preparation of talking points for Reagan's visits overseas. At least I assume they were standing instructions, because they came over immediately to us when I was preparing the briefing materials for his visit to Portugal. And those instructions were that for each of his meetings you were to prepare one 3x5 card and all the talking points that you wanted him to raise had to fit within the confines of that 3x5 card. That's not much. I think what typically happened was that he would go into a meeting and read off the items on the 3x5 card fairly early in the conversation and then the balance of the conversation would swing off to pleasantries or chit chat on other things. That's certainly what happened in his meetings in Portugal. It was kind of an interesting insight into how a presidential visit during the Reagan era was conducted.

Q: You left the Portuguese desk when?

NICHOLSON: In 1985.

Q: Where did you go then?

NICHOLSON: I went into the Bureau of Intelligence and Research once more, this time to an office that was the coordinator between the State Department and U.S. intelligence agencies on their overseas intelligence operations, in order in some cases to facilitate those operations to the extent that our diplomatic apparatus could be of assistance since obviously a number of our operations abroad are done with the full knowledge and cooperation of other countries, and at the same time to monitor and review from a policy standpoint those operations to make sure that they were not incurring undue risks that could come back to haunt us politically in our foreign affairs. So it was both a facilitative role on the one hand and a watchdog role on the other.

Q: What would happen... Let's say you're in Country X and the CIA talks about destabilizing or changing something there. At your level, would you be made aware of it?

NICHOLSON: Certain people in my office would have been, although by that time I think the CIA had gotten pretty much out of that business, but in any event I was not involved with CIA activities. My area of responsibility was dealing with the military, primarily part of the Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, on aerial reconnaissance flights and naval reconnaissance vessels. We're talking things like U-2 flights or SR-71 flights and so on. Unfortunately, there's not a whole lot of detail I can go into on that because there I am still bound...

Q: I understand. In general terms though, during this time... You were there from '85 to when?

NICHOLSON: '85 to '87.

Q: In very general terms, was the situation relatively stable... We'd been running these reconnaissance flights and ship missions on well known routes so far off the coast of China or off the Soviet Union or something like that. Had we reached the stage where we

had enough agreement so they weren't and we weren't buzzing each other and running into a dangerous thing?

NICHOLSON: We did undertake from time to time new projects of greater or lesser duration, but most of the aerial and naval activities followed well established tracks which had been used for years and were in international airspace or international waters. So the various sides - in particular the Soviet Union and China - had pretty much accustomed themselves to these activities whether they liked them or not. There wasn't much interference and we assessed the risk there as pretty low. If we were in a situation dealing not with the Soviet Union or China but with another country, particularly a Third World country that might be less predictable and conceivably prone to take action, then people assessed quite carefully what that country's air defense capabilities might be, what we might encounter. So, in general, a fairly conservative philosophy in terms of risk taking dominated.

Q: I would think North Korea is a prime example.

NICHOLSON: Yes. They were alwayand I guess still are - the source of particular concern that they might suddenly take an action we would find irrational and precisely because of that unpredictable. The other country of special concern at that time—because it had demonstrated not long before a willingness to challenge a U.S. aircraft in international waters—was Libya, with which we had very tense relations during that period. But by and large, the aerial reconnaissance program was a relatively routine, low risk affair. With the exception of ad hoc projects (including unilateral overflights of a country's airspace) if necessary during periods of conflict, or sometimes in peacetime covert cooperation with various Third World countries particularly on counter-insurgency and counter-narcotics operations, we were rarely deviating from the standard mission patterns characteristic of the Cold War period.

Q: Did you have any feel for... What were our relations with the FBI? The FBI is supposed to do intelligence within the United States but it also had offices abroad. One of the criticisms after the terrorist attack in New York in 2001 was that the FBI was not sharing its information well with the State Department on terrorists and vice versa. There wasn't very good coordination on that sort of thing. Did you have any feel for that at the time?

NICHOLSON: Unfortunately not. While my office did deal with the FBI, that was outside my purview. My dealings focused on the Joint Chiefs of Staff and the Department of Defense, particularly the Defense Intelligence Agency, as well as with our embassies abroad when their assistance was needed in getting foreign government approvals for certain cooperative reconnaissance projects.

Q: Did you get any feel for the rather distant relationship between the Secretary of State, George Shultz, and the Secretary of Defense, Casper Weinberger? Did that permeate down to any other levels?

NICHOLSON: No, not among the people with whom I worked. There was a group of people from the Office of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, from DIA, and myself from State, who met each morning at the Pentagon and worked on these programs together and massaged them. So we developed a pretty close and collegial working relationship.

Q: Did you find, for example, in risk assessment, in which there's always a political and then there's the military side...did you feel you and your State colleagues were aware enough of the military side of things and your military counterparts were aware of the political side of things? Were you training each other?

NICHOLSON: Yes. In fact, I took a couple of formal military courses involving these aircraft and certain naval vessels, which were both interesting and informative.

Q: What sort of courses?

NICHOLSON: In the case of the U-2 and SR-71 aircraft, for example, one learned the precise capabilities and limitations of the aircraft, the broader support system for them, how reconnaissance flight tracks were designed, etc. So, yes, there was a mutual education process going on. From me, I believe my military counterparts became more aware of the political constraints on some of these flights and the necessity to tailor the flight tracks accordingly, especially in those cases where a mission could not be purely unilateral but required overflight clearances from cooperating states. I also conveyed to them in some cases the need for adequate information-sharing of the results of the missions with cooperating states, since it was my office and our embassies which sometimes had to negotiate quid pro quo arrangements. In any event, I note that a number of the JCS representatives on our “working group” earlier had been SR-71 or U-2 pilots themselves, were of solid judgment, and were not prone to undertake risky activities without good reason.

Q: During the late '40s and '50s and even a little into the '60s, we were losing a lot of planes. I was an Air Force intercept operator in Russian. I was in Japan and they were looking around for volunteers. We kind of knew what was going on. They certainly didn't get any volunteering from me. These planes were being kind of... “Let's go over there and see what happens” and they were getting shot down.

NICHOLSON: I suspect a couple factors were at work. The worst time was in the period immediately after World War II and into the '50s, when relations between the two superpowers were perhaps at their most unstable. During most of these years the USSR was under the Stalin regime. It was a period - and this is no secret - when the U.S. during the latter part of the '50s was flying U-2s over the Soviet Union to try to establish whether or not there was a missile gap. That violation of their aerial sovereignty did not please the Russians. It abruptly stopped after the U-2 aircraft piloted by Francis Gary Powers was shot down in 1960. We developed other ways to collect the information we needed, primarily using satellites. It was also a time when some other U.S. reconnaissance

aircraft - I can only speculate on this because I wasn't around in the '50s - may have ventured very close to Soviet borders specifically to excite a reaction, the better to assess Soviet air defense capabilities since ultimately a lot of the information being gathered was designed to facilitate the United States if we ever had to go to general war, which would have included at that time the use of the Strategic Air Command (SAC) in nuclear bombing missions against the Soviet Union. SAC had good reason to want to know what might be coming at them and one way to do that was to move U.S. aircraft in close and observe the Soviet reaction. The tacit rules of the game for these or even more “innocent” reconnaissance missions observing a longer stand-off distance simply had not been developed between the two sides at that point, so it was a pretty scary period. But that was long past by the '80s. By then we flew long-established and thus pretty predictable tracks. They were outside Soviet airspace. Some occasionally came in closer than others but always in international airspace. The Soviets quite often sent up somebody either just to sniff around or to demonstrate that they knew we were there and they were capable of responding. It was a means of demonstrating their general deterrent capability. But these superpower interactions were pretty routinized, carrying low risk. As I noted earlier, higher risk was involved if reconnaissance flights involved hostile countries with which those kinds of implicit understandings had not been developed, and particularly countries - and we're talking again Third World - that might not have a very good or centralized command and control system and where both the finger on the trigger and the decision to shoot at a U.S. plane might not reside in the capital but with some lower-ranking officer manning an air defense facility. When dealing with those sorts of countries, the fact that we might be in international airspace was not considered to be a foolproof grant of immunity if our planes were going to be approaching in proximity to the country's territory, or if we were in international airspace to which a country had asserted a claim beyond what international convention would allow and we were determined to test that claim and not let it go unchallenged. In such cases, a very careful assessment of risk and that country's air defense capabilities to shoot us down was made before we determined whether and how to proceed.

Q: We did one of these things - this was public knowledge - in the Gulf of Sidra. Qadhafi had unilaterally announced that the Gulf of Sidra was-

NICHOLSON: Libyan internal waters.

Q: "The Gulf of Death" or something like that. We sent some carrier planes into that and the Libyans sent some planes up and we shot them down.

NICHOLSON: Yes. That took place while I was in the job. After those incidents we were quite careful in testing the waters before again sending routine reconnaissance flights over international waters in the Gulf of Sidra. And as I recall, at least initially we had fighter escorts either accompanying them or in a stand-off holding pattern available to go in immediately if necessary to protect those reconnaissance flights.

Q: I guess the KAL shoot down over the Kamchatka Peninsula was not part of this business but it must have had effects on it. This caused quite a stir when the Soviets shot down a KAL commercial plane. That was probably around '82 or so.

NICHOLSON: In the case of the KAL flight, the aircraft actually wandered into Soviet airspace due to instrument error and perhaps pilot error. The Russian reaction was disproportionate to say the least, but in any event this case was distinct from what we were doing, which was operating over international airspace when it came to reconnaissance vis a vis the Soviet Union or China.

Q: Just as a side note, one of these routine flights turned into a real international incident with China not long ago. It appears that you had a Chinese pilot who was playing games and collided with our plane and our plane had to land in Chinese territory but after a lot of demonstrations and everything else, all the crew came back.

NICHOLSON: These operations are never entirely risk free. One possibility, especially if one of these flights is intercepted, is that some foreign top gun hot dog pilot does

something stupid and then it becomes an international incident and few governments want to fess up and say, “It was our fault,” especially if they don't like what you're doing in the first place, albeit in international airspace. I suspect the case you mentioned was a stupid accident, although it is possible that these Chinese pilots were under instruction to move in closer to our aircraft than normal to show us a sign of displeasure over U.S. policy towards Taiwan or some other issue. For example, we periodically undertake weapons sales to Taiwan which always make the Chinese very unhappy. These fellows may have been told to be a little more aggressive in their patrolling than usual, but it sounds to me as if this pilot in any event took it one step beyond for the sake of his personal enjoyment or bravado.

Q: This is probably a good place to stop. Where did you go in '87?

NICHOLSON: I went into almost a year of Thai language training in preparation for my first assignment to Bangkok in the political section, where I served as the political-military officer.

Q: We'll pick it up then.

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Today is October 1, 2003. Thai. How did you find the language?

NICHOLSON: First, as I suggested after we wound up and the tape was cut off at the last session, let me recount a couple of anecdotes going back to the period in 1980 when I was involved in the Political-Military Bureau with the SALT negotiations. They are somewhat amusing. To begin with, one of the sore points of the treaty with critics in Congress and elsewhere who found it wanting was over the issue of whether to count one type of Soviet bomber—the so-called “Backfire” bomber—as strategic and thus subject to the limits of SALT II or whether to consider it an intermediate range airplane which would therefore fall outside the limits of the treaty. The critics asserted that the administration

was underestimating the capabilities of the aircraft and therefore leaving out of the treaty balance this bomber fleet, which would tilt matters more in favor of the Soviets. The administration was not persuaded that it was a strategic bomber, but it did have some capabilities which allowed a case to be made for the other side of that argument. In order to resolve the issue at the end of the treaty negotiations, and because the Soviets were dead set against including the aircraft in SALT and the case to do so was ambiguous at best, the United States made a unilateral statement in the negotiations recalling an earlier exchange between Presidents Carter and Brezhnev in which the latter undertook not to enhance the range capability of the Backfire to be able to reach the United States, and to limit its production numbers, while Carter declared these commitments essential to Soviet obligations under the future Treaty. The Russians simply took in this unilateral statement recalling the Carter/Brezhnev exchange and said nothing. The position of the administration when it was going to defend the treaty on the Hill was that we had made this statement, it had not been contradicted by the Soviets, which indicated tacit acceptance of it, and therefore we had solved the problem. Well, obviously, a lot of the critics on the Hill found that a fairly weak reed on which to lean as versus inclusion of such commitments in the actual treaty language. We at one point had sought with the Soviets a written exchange of letters or statements on the issue tied to the Treaty, but they would have none of it, so essentially it became largely a one-sided performance on our part. But the administration was anxious to put this in the best light to persuade the Congress that we had gotten what we needed. I can recall that on the evening before the formal treaty text was sent up to the Senate, I and Ed Cummings, the lawyer who specialized in arms control negotiations in the Department's Office of the Legal Advisor, were both on our hands and knees in his office with these large treaty folios folded out as we went through them word by word just to make sure they conformed with the agreed treaty text as reflected in the negotiation record. In doing so, it had been decided at some level to include as a loose leaf sheet of paper in the ribbon-sealed bound treaty volumes a written transcript of the U.S. unilateral statement which, while it may have been part of the negotiating record, was not formally part of the treaty. So we typed up the statement on

very nice formal stationery, and then added to the bells and whistles by placing a consular type seal on it and stamp-impressing that to make the document look all the more official before we inserted it loose leaf into the treaty folios, which went up to the Senate the next day. In the end, that added sheet did not impress the treaty critics, but the episode is an amusing sidelight to the effort by the Administration to obtain Senate ratification.

Q: Were the critics basically the hardliners, the ones that didn't want the treaty, or were these people really concerned about the facts?

NICHOLSON: The majority of them were really people who were ideologically against or innately suspicious of any arms control agreement regardless of the merits, and were looking for flaws to pick at. I think most of the people in the Senate who came at this with an open mind were reasonably satisfied.

The other anecdote I'll mention is that during the last “end game” stage of the negotiations, which entailed the accelerated solution of many major outstanding issues, we at State were not infrequently getting calls from Strobe Talbott, who was then a journalist for “Time Magazine.” I received one or two such calls. Being relatively junior on the totem pole and imbued with the notion that one could not discuss such sensitive classified matters with the press, I basically waved off his questions, at which point he promptly got hold of some of my superiors in the Bureau who will remain unnamed but with whom he was familiar and whom he quizzed for the details of how these issues were just then falling into place. Being still a bit naive, I was quite dumbfounded by the willingness of my colleagues to give Talbott such “real-time” information, which I assume he was getting also at least in part from other agencies of the government involved in the negotiations, since he was well connected around town. It was through these kinds of over-the-telephone discussions that Talbott within a very short period of time after the treaty was concluded (a month or two, I believe) was able to come out with a very good and very accurate book, “Endgame,” describing the negotiating process and how SALT II came into being. I don't think the book gave away any vital state secrets, but it certainly gave away some of the inner workings of

the negotiating process which both governments in theory at least would have preferred to keep in the private domain. This was my first direct exposure to how the press really operates and the tendency of senior officials to leak when it suits their convenience. They saw that the publication of such a book and its accurate description of how we got to the final version of the treaty could in the end only benefit the effort to persuade the public and the Senate that we had achieved a decent result. Nonetheless, it amused me much later after Talbott became Deputy Secretary of State under the Clinton administration to think that there were likely occasions when he was pulling his hair out over Department press leaks of the sort he himself had once been so adept at eliciting.

Q: While you were dealing with the Backfire bomber issue, did we have any American Backfires that we were not talking about... The equivalent to something that, gee, could be stretched to represent that sort of thing?

NICHOLSON: No. There was no ambiguity on our side because there was a clear cut distinction between our strategic bombers, in particular the B-1, the B-52, and I believe the B-2 may have been in existence by then, and our other aircraft. Apart from the B-1 and the B-2, the U.S. had really deemphasized the development of strategic aircraft from the '60s onward, opting primarily for intercontinental ballistic missiles.

Q: In 1987, you were taking Thai. Had this been an ambition of yours or did somebody say, "You take Thai?"

NICHOLSON: I had wanted to do a tour in East Asia to get into a cultural sphere of the world that would be significantly different from what I was accustomed to, in a way that Europe or even Latin America, being ultimately Western, were not. In fact, I almost ended up going to Japan in the early '80s. After Portugal I was offered an assignment in the Tokyo political section, which I probably made a mistake in rejecting. Instead, because I thought that desk experience at State was important to one's career development, and because the Embassy in Lisbon was strongly supportive of having a veteran Lisbon hand

on the desk, I returned to Washington and became the desk officer for Portugal. So when the possibility of an East Asian assignment came up again several years later, I was eager to go off to Thailand.

Q: How did you find the Thai language and the training?

NICHOLSON: The language was difficult, not so difficult as Chinese or Japanese, but still a challenge. It is a tonal language where sometimes the same word can mean four different things depending upon the pitch of the voice. At least it has a written script which is alphabetic rather than pictographic as Chinese is, but that script is written in an alphabet that bears no resemblance to the Roman alphabet we're accustomed to and which is written left to right across the page without any breaks in the words—an uninterrupted sequence of the letters—so that you have to pick out the words from this sequence in a foreign alphabet. So, both from a speaking and a reading standpoint, Thai is not easy.

The training I thought was fairly mediocre. It was not that tightly organized. It's interesting that in my experience of attending FSI a couple of times for full language courses, plus once or twice for brief refreshers, it seems that the pedagogy of the various language departments often mirrors the culture of the countries out of which the instructors come. The Thais are an easygoing group of people who are not necessarily the best organizers and that was reflected in the instruction we received. On the other hand, at least when I was at FSI, the Japanese language faculty had the reputation of being ferocious disciplinarians and very hard charging and demanding of their students. I have to think that the difference between Japanese and Thai as people and as cultures was translated into the teaching at FSI because the native speakers at that time, and I think still to a considerable extent, have a lot of influence in molding the programs. FSI has mostly American-born administrators who in theory oversee those programs, but they tend to be stretched thin and certainly in recent years I gather some of them have to deal with 4, 5, or 6 different language departments, some of which are teaching languages the administrator

may not even speak. So oversight from the top seems pretty loose and therefore much depends on the native foreign speaker instructors.

Q: You went to Thailand in '88?

NICHOLSON: I was there from the summer of '88 until the summer of 1991.

Q: You were a political-military officer. When you got to Thailand, how was the government, the situation in Thailand? Then we'll talk about relations with the United States.

NICHOLSON: The government was democratically elected, which in that era was a rarity for Thailand because Thailand for a long period had been dominated by the Thai military, actually since the 1930s when the monarch at the time was forced to cede real power to the military. But I was there during an interval of democratically elected government. It was a government which was testing the limits of how far it could go, particularly when it came to decisions that affected directly the interests of the Thai military. Our own relations at the time were very good and had been since the end of World War II when we chose to treat Thailand as an ally rather than as an enemy state despite British demands at the time for financial and other penalties to be assessed against the Thais for their role in having essentially opened the door to the Japanese Army to transit Thailand on the way from Indochina to attack British-held Burma. There is an interesting anecdote that the Thai government, faced with Japanese demands for transit, at first demurred but then after the Japanese opened fire on the border, the Thais quickly conceded and the Japanese were given access. The government threw in its lot with Japan and in fact issued a declaration of war against the United States. The ambassador of Thailand in the United States at the time, who was a great proponent of democracy and not in great sympathy with the quasi-dictatorial government of the day in Bangkok, took that declaration of war and put it in his desk drawer and never delivered it. On the contrary, he helped to organize a resistance movement in Thailand which cooperated with the OSS and the British particularly around

'44/'45 and in a modest but helpful way assisted the Allied retaking of Thailand and the expulsion of the Japanese. And so we were faced at the end of the war with the choice of how to deal with Thailand: the Thailand of the resistance movement or the Thailand whose government had thrown in their lot at the beginning of the war in an opportunistic way with the Japanese, misjudging how the winds were blowing. We chose to treat Thailand as an ally and they did not forget that. Of course, they were also looking, as they have in the past, for a relationship with a powerful outside state which could help them in maintaining sovereignty. This became even more important in the 1950s after the communist victory in China. So, we developed in the postwar period a very close military relationship with Thailand, to include basing rights, military exercises... In fact, the centerpiece of our relationship with the Thais besides certain USAID programs was our bilateral military relationship during most of the postwar period.

Q: You arrived there about 13 years after the fall of South Vietnam. Did you note any residue of concern about American commitment? How did that event play out while you were there?

NICHOLSON: No, it was not a primary concern of the Thais by that time. They had mended their fences with the Vietnamese regime and succeeded in putting relations with Vietnam on a pretty even keel. Their concern in 1975 after the United States essentially had lost the Vietnam War and was on a course of major withdrawal from Southeast Asia was that Thailand would be left holding the bag with no effective assistance from the United States, facing a victorious Vietnamese regime unhappy about the fact that Thailand had provided us the air bases from which much of the air war against Laos and a good deal of the bombing of North Vietnam had taken place. So, the Thais very quickly in 1975 insisted that the U.S. withdraw forthwith from Thai bases in order to eliminate that potential irritant to the Vietnamese. It reflected their concern that we had no staying power in Southeast Asia. But by the time I arrived there, we were back, not with permanent basing but certainly with regular transits and use of Thai bases and with a robust bilateral exercise program and port call program. The U.S. Navy was present in Southeast Asia. And the

immediate postwar tensions with the Vietnamese had vanished, so there was no longer any immediate sense of threat on the part of the Thais and they were fairly relaxed about the question of U.S. commitment. But we were always careful to reaffirm that commitment at every opportunity, including in high level meetings.

Q: What was the situation in the Philippines? That was our major basing in the area, Clark Field and Subic Bay. Were they still intact?

NICHOLSON: They were still functioning. It was not until the early '90s, around '91/'92, that we entered into another of the periodic base renegotiations with the Filipinos which ultimately proved unsuccessful, requiring our departure from those bases. But when I was in Bangkok we were there in the Philippines and there was the expectation that we would remain.

Q: So, we weren't looking at Thailand as becoming more a base area than it was.

NICHOLSON: No.

Q: You talk about exercises. What were our concerns at that time?

NICHOLSON: We undertook annual military exercises involving all of our services and all of the Thai services in part to demonstrate a continued presence and interest, and in part because it in fact provided useful training for U.S. units which were potentially earmarked to Asia in the event of conflict there. It was a practical arrangement that was of convenience to us as well as politically symbolic and convenient to the Thais because these exercises, the principal of which was called “Cobra Gold,” were the best, if not indeed the principal opportunity that the Thai armed forces had to obtain realistic training.

Q: Who was the potential enemy?

NICHOLSON: The potential enemy typically was postulated as a threat from the north which would imply Vietnam or China but was not stated as such. Eventually there was

an effort—more in the mid-'90s when I was in Thailand for a second tour— to rotate these exercises among the four different military regions of Thailand in order to spread the opportunity for various Thai units to get experience and also to avoid a routinization, always doing the same thing in the same way, which could have reduced the benefit of the experience. In that context, if you're exercising down in southern Thailand, you can't postulate an invasion from the north because you're completely mal-positioned to meet it.

The training U.S. forces received through these exercises was valuable to us. Among other things, the Marines benefited from the opportunity to undertake amphibious landings on Thai beaches, which is something for which the opportunities at least in the continental U.S. are pretty limited.

Q: Who was the ambassador when you were there?

NICHOLSON: It was Daniel O'Donohue.

Q: Talk about your work while you were there this first time.

NICHOLSON: It involved in part doing political reporting on the Thai military and their role in the country. It involved, in cooperation with the U.S. Military Assistance Group (known as JUSMAG), preparing analyses for submission to the Department with proposals and justifications for upcoming military assistance in each annual cycle wherein appropriations and authorizations were sought from the Congress to provide that assistance. It involved a lot of liaison with the Defense Attach# Office and JUSMAG, work on the joint exercise program with the Thais, things of that nature. In sum, it was in part reporting, but a lot of it was coordination and working on documentation to justify a military assistance program.

Q: What was your reading with the attach#s of the Thai military at that time, their effectiveness and their politicization or lack thereof?

NICHOLSON: They were in fact a politicized force, which had been directly or indirectly running the country for most of the postwar period. Many officers were involved on the side in various business ventures which tended in some cases to divert their attention from their military duties. They were very rank heavy in their structure. There were far more Thai generals in their army than there were in the United States army despite the fact that at the time the U.S. Army was far, far larger. There was a system of almost automatic promotion up through the ranks in a career which extended into one's early 60s, which was a practice very different from our own. They had a reputation, or at least some of them did, for corruption. So, it was deemed an institution with which we had close ties, good friendships, many personal ties not least because many of their officers had attended U.S. military schools, and which we could count on as an ally, but which as a fighting force was limited in its capabilities and as a political force had a tendency still to meddle heavily in politics as well as in the business world. Indeed, while I was there, there was a coup d'etat which overthrew the democratically elected government.

Q: Before we get to that, you had not the greatest regime around, particularly Burma with its hermit-like existence, but they were fighting the war in the interior, and then you had Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Were there incursions or any problems?

NICHOLSON: Along the Burmese border, there were and continue to be insurgencies by various groups, basically mountain people who are ethnically distinct from the Burman majority and who came into conflict with the Burmese military government, since the latter at that time sporadically sent out military expeditions against the ethnic groups. But those expeditions could not sustain themselves very long because the transportation infrastructure into these remote areas was poor and particularly during the rainy season made it impossible for the Burmese army to sustain a major force and a major offensive. So there were scattered problems along the Burmese border, which became far worse later in the '90s when the Burmese in fact succeeded in building enough infrastructure and

building the Burmese army up enough to put more permanent pressure on the minorities along the Thai/Burma border.

In Laos, relations between the Thais and the Laotians were not good. While I was there in the mid-'80s there was a small border war fought between Thailand and Laos over a disputed portion of territory on the frontier. In the end, the Thais lost, which underlines the comments I was making before that the Thai military as a fighting force as distinct from a political actor had pretty limited capabilities. It was quite an embarrassment for them to be defeated by a small country of three million people whom Thailand traditionally has tended to look down upon as rustics.

And then on the Thai side of the border with Cambodia, you had very large Cambodian refugee camps stemming from the former Khmer Rouge regime in Phnom Penh and its later overthrow by the Vietnamese-backed Hun Sen regime, with which Thai relations were also strained.

Q: Were there any figures within the Thai military who were trying to turn this into a more professional military force?

NICHOLSON: Yes, there were, and some of those men did achieve promotion to high position on merit. But there were at least an equal number who were less professional and less devoted to the military career as such.

Q: On the Thai military side, what about the royal family? Did they play much of a role?

NICHOLSON: Yes, they did. The monarchy had essentially had its wings clipped as a result of the military revolution in 1932 after which, while the monarchy was maintained, it largely withdrew from the scene. Then in 1946, the king who is still on the throne, King Phumiphon Adunyadet, was crowned. During the '50s he slowly increased the visibility of the monarchy. Because he is a man who gets out among the people and has devoted himself to good works and projects to improve the life of the peasantry, and also through

the simple fact of longevity, having by now been on the throne for more than 50 years, he has acquired incredible moral authority with the Thai people. While he has been careful to use that sparingly, it has given the monarchy at critical political junctures the ability to determine political outcomes in Thailand even though under the constitution the king in formal terms is a constitutional monarch like the Queen of England with no real executive power. But the reality is that on the rare occasions he chooses to act, his word is essentially law in Thailand. It's interesting. You can still be put into jail in Thailand for insulting the monarch. They have tough lese majeste laws.

Q: You were sort of the new boy on the block. How did you find our embassy? It's always a problem if Americans go to a place... We've got a lot of power and all. Were we heavy handed? Did you feel we were sufficiently subtle in how we dealt with things?

NICHOLSON: By and large, we were not excessively crude or insensitive in throwing our weight around. We obviously carried considerable weight and were involved in many different sectors of Thai life because the agenda of bilateral cooperation was very broad. But it was dealt with in a pretty subtle way. From the Thai side, they themselves are past masters at dealing with foreigners and being agreeable but through very sinuous and subtle ways pursuing their own agendas. They bend with the wind but they never break. They've been doing it for centuries. It's how Thailand managed to preserve its independence against French and potentially British encroachments at the end of the 19th century. They did it by giving in on just enough agenda items to avoid giving either the French or the British a pretext for outright invasion or colonization. It's a classic style of theirs and it suits the Thai personality, which is a very flexible, sinuous personality. So they were able, recognizing the natural imbalance in the relationship between a smaller country and a much larger one, to hold their own and to profit from that relationship. It was not one sided.

Q: Did you find Thai officials and others receptive to Americans? Could you deal with them easily?

NICHOLSON: Very easily. They were very accessible. They were collegial. They were friendly. And some of them remain friends of mine to this day years later. That said, they were also adept at pursuing their own country's interests as they saw them. That style of being very open, very pleasant to deal with, did not mean that they were always prepared to meet our requests.

Q: What about working there? How was the traffic at the time you were there?

NICHOLSON: The traffic was bad and getting worse. It was reasonably orderly in one sense. It wasn't chaotic as in, for instance, some Arab countries where people do not recognize traffic lanes but squeeze as many cars as can fit abreast on a city street. People in Bangkok observed the stop signs and the traffic lights and lanes. But the traffic was just so thick that it moved slowly. It got steadily worse in the '90s because Thailand underwent an economic boom. Many more people could afford automobiles. But the infrastructure of the city did not keep up. That changed, or at least there was some alleviation of the traffic, around the year 2000 after a number of mass transit infrastructure projects, including an elevated rail system, came on stream. But I suspect the relief is only temporary and even in the best of circumstances, traffic in Bangkok is difficult.

Q: Looking at the embassy community, Bangkok had become the center of the sex industry. Did this affect the American community there? Was this a problem of staffing and all that?

NICHOLSON: It didn't affect the U.S. community much, although who knows who among the staff may have been taking advantage of some opportunities. But in a collective sense, the one concern was that this fairly wide open society could affect kids, especially teenagers, because they had all these temptations being dangled out there, although actually the concern tended to focus less on sex than on the ready availability of drugs. Thailand at that time was a major transshipment point for opium being grown in Burma.

Later in the '90s, it became flooded with synthetic drugs (methamphetamines and so on) which hooked a lot of Thai kids. So, the concern for American kids in Bangkok was there.

Q: Going back to the borders, were the Thais and were we looking at India as becoming a major dominant power there and something to be concerned about?

NICHOLSON: I think the answer is somewhat, but not much. The Indians were expanding their navy and there was some thought that they might seek a larger presence in the South China Sea. And they had more cooperative relations with the Burmese than we might have liked—as you would expect, since the Burmese were on their border. But I don't think there was that acute a concern with India. The real concern as it evolved over those years and in the '90s was with China.

Q: What was the Chinese presence there?

NICHOLSON: It was largely commercial and it was channeled in part through a very large Sino-Thai minority which in fact dominates the Thai economy, just as Chinese minorities in other parts of Southeast Asia play a similar role. That was the principal element. As time went along, however, China also began building military forces which potentially could project power, and the Chinese became very active in cultivating the Burmese. There was concern about potential Chinese access to the Indian Ocean and indirectly to the South China Sea through Burma, and as China became a major military supplier to the Burmese because nobody else would sell to that regime, concern grew as to what role China was seeking to play and whether it would be a constructive one or an effort to project coercive influence into Southeast Asia.

Q: The Soviet Union was going through essentially a second revolution and moving rapidly towards being no longer the Soviet Union. Did those events play at all down there or was that just too far away?

NICHOLSON: The Thais were attentive to it, but it was not a major issue for them. I'm sure they were glad to see the end of the Soviet Union given the traditional Thai concern about communist expansionism, for which the Soviet Union had been a major proponent, although the Chinese were the real 800 pound gorilla in the immediate neighborhood. But because those events were fairly distant, I don't think they impacted the Thais very much.

Q: Did you have any high level visits while you were there?

NICHOLSON: Not during my first tour.

Q: How did the coup affect you? Did you know it was coming? How did this work out?

NICHOLSON: No. As best I could determine, no one in the embassy had any advance warning. The coup occurred early on a Saturday morning. If we picked up any signs of it, it would have been no more than an hour or two before it took place and as the forces were already in motion. The coup reflected the fact that the civilian Thai government had been pressing the limits in attempting to exert greater authority, particularly over military affairs, which the Thai military saw as its exclusive prerogative, and you also had a rather loose tongued prime minister who from time to time came out with comments which the military saw as critical of them, as attacking them. Suspicions grew within the military, and ultimately the commander of the Thai army, who was a very politically ambitious person in the first place, grew personally suspicious that the prime minister was planning to fire him. He therefore decided to move first in concert with his military colleagues, who by that time were fed up with the prime minister and his regime. So, I was in the embassy probably as the duty officer or just wrapping some things up on a Saturday morning when suddenly I got the word that something was afoot. We turned on the television set and saw not the usual programming but a blank screen with patriotic march music in the background. Then suddenly on the screen appeared a live image of the supreme commander of the Thai armed forces and the four service chiefs, representing the army, navy, marine corps, and air force - all seated together with the supreme commander announcing a coup d'etat.

At that point it was clear to everyone that the show was over because if the military was that cohesive there was not going to be any effective resistance to the coup. And, indeed, it was carried out bloodlessly in a very gentlemanly and sophisticated way because the Thais are accustomed to coups and normally seek not to bloody themselves in domestic political conflicts, although eventually events did turn bloody a year or two later. So that was that.

We then had to determine how the United States should react to the overthrow of a democratically elected government. That, in many major aspects, was already a matter dictated by law, in particular by congressional legislation long on the books and designed to discourage military coups by requiring the cutoff of various types of U.S. assistance, particularly military assistance. But there were a number of policy areas and decisions affecting different aspects of our broad-ranging military relationship with Thailand where there was a certain amount of discretion. We as an embassy had to come up that day or certainly that weekend with recommendations to Washington on what should be cut off and what should not. And it fell to me to draw up that list of recommendations.

Q: Was there a file? They had had these coups from time to time. Was there almost a standard operating procedure for coups?

NICHOLSON: Not at the embassy in Bangkok. In the Department there was, as I discovered during my next tour when I was in the Political-Military Bureau doing security assistance and we confronted a couple coups overseas. It became a standard drill at least in dealing with those decisions which are virtually dictated by law, but it is amazing how many grey areas can suddenly appear when you're talking about a security assistance relationship and military equipment which is either on order or actively in the pipeline or even on ships en route to Country X. Where do you draw the line and stop? Where do you let ongoing actions proceed to their conclusion, but no more? So in certain aspects this was a straightforward drill, but in other aspects there were decisions to be made.

Q: What did we do?

NICHOLSON: My objective, and I think that of others since nobody ever said “No” to me, was that this was a military relationship which we wanted to preserve for the long term, that we had to take punitive actions, some of them required by law and some of them really quite obvious whether legally required or not, but that we did want to minimize to the extent possible the impact on the Thai military and our relationship with them because we recognized, besides the military value of that relationship, that the Thai armed forces were likely to continue for a long time to be a major political actor and not just an armed force in Thailand. In framing a response to the coup, we in the first place had a rather thorny problem in that one of these very large bilateral Cobra Gold exercises involving the dispatch on the order of 10-15,000 U.S. troops was about to unfold and the coup took place on the eve of the exercise. The question was, do we suddenly cancel it and throw away the millions of dollars that had been spent on both sides on a once a year opportunity, or do we proceed with it? Well, we proceeded with it. But on the other hand, we made sure that our military commanders involved had been directed not to appear too chummy with their Thai counterparts and that there were not going to be major social events which could be publicized. So, yes, we would do the exercise but it was not going to be one of these celebratory fraternal occasions, at least in the public domain. On another issue, we by law had to cancel military assistance but there were a number of purchases the Thais were making on their own and the question was, should we disallow them to purchase U.S. military equipment with their own resources? There, the pace of sales was curtailed and certain major high profile items of military equipment were held back for a while, including, as I recall, fighter aircraft. But the pipeline was never closed down completely. And we preserved most of our exercise programs with Thailand. But it's interesting that perhaps the one measure which, as we discovered later from comments by Thai military officers, irritated or angered the Thai military leadership the most was something that we looked on at the time as a fairly minor, although necessary, symbolic act. Namely, either or both the supreme commander of the Thai armed forces, General

Sunthorn, and the Thai army commander who had been the real inspiration behind this coup, General Suchinda Kraprayoon, earlier had been invited to Fort Leavenworth to the infantry school there to be inducted into the school's hall of fame of foreign military students who had made good in their careers and reached high positions. At least one was going to Leavenworth and one had a similar invitation to another occasion. We had to disinvite them both because we obviously could not be celebrating these fellows in the halls of the U.S. military only 3 or 4 or 5 months after they had overthrown a democratic government. But they took that as a personal insult and felt it keenly, because they actually were very proud at the prospect of receiving this honor. It irritated them probably more than the cutoff of some millions of dollars of U.S. military assistance.

Q: How did things go as you moved up towards your departure in '91? Were relations more strained?

NICHOLSON: They were businesslike or, frankly, businesslike to reasonably cordial. We did not really go out of our way to offend or otherwise cold shoulder the Thai military nor did we need to because they fairly quickly put into place a technocratic cabinet with a respected civilian prime minister. So, we were not dealing, as is the case in Burma, with a group of generals who were running ministries lock, stock, and barrel. They were calling the shots as a kind of oversight board of directors with ultimate authority, but civilians were running the government on a day to day basis.

Q: You left there in '91.

NICHOLSON: Yes, I returned to Washington, where I served as deputy director of the office in the Political-Military Affairs Bureau which was responsible for security assistance and for arms transfer policy. I was actually one of three deputy directors. One dealt with the Congressional budget process and with U.S. educational training for foreign military officers, one dealt with security assistance and arms transfer policy for Europe and Africa, and one, namely myself, dealt with Latin America and East Asia.

Q: Was the Middle East part of the Africa section of that office?

NICHOLSON: Yes.

Q: East Asia would involve Pakistan?

NICHOLSON: East Asia for those purposes began at the Bangladesh-Burmese border and extended from Burma eastward.

Q: You were there from '91 to when?

NICHOLSON: To '93.

Q: What were the issues that you got involved with?

NICHOLSON: One which seemed to be a perennial was Haiti. That was the period in which the Haitian military overthrew the government of President Aristide and we were pressuring them to step aside and bring him back. We succeeded at least in shoving the military out. The question was developing an assistance package to help the new government. Actually, we were developing that assistance package even before the military had stepped aside so as to try to have it in place and perhaps even use the prospect as an incentive to the military to step aside. It included a lot of police training and some military training as well as economic assistance. So there were endless interagency meetings to try to put that together, which meant pulling resources from one or another country project to make them available for Haiti, and that's always a bureaucratic tugging and pulling process. From those interagency meetings, which were chaired by ARA Deputy Assistant Secretary Bob Gelbard, the impression that struck me, besides the usual difficulty of getting consensus when money is involved, was that what really was driving this on a day to day basis and the efforts of the administration to get the generals to move out was the continuing outflow of refugees from Haiti headed towards Florida as the economic situation in Haiti grew ever worse, and as our efforts to block that refugee

tide were sometimes assisted and sometimes thwarted by various court decisions in the United States which either supported or curtailed the ability of the administration either to intercept the migrants or to hold them upon arrival for deportation. This Haitian outflow was viewed as unsustainable over the long term for reasons unstated in those interagency meetings but certainly having to do with the limited tolerance of the American public for it. And that lent a certain urgency for us in trying to create an assistance package and I'm sure at the higher levels of the Administration in pressuring and ultimately threatening a U.S. invasion to force the Haitian military to cede power back to a democratic government or at least an interim civilian government.

Q: Did you have much contact with the Haitian military?

NICHOLSON: No, none. My job in Washington was basically an interagency exercise involving little if any contact with foreign officials.

Q: Did you think our control over military equipment and giving or refusing had much impact as far as the Haitian military was concerned?

NICHOLSON: No. I think it was ultimately the U.S. threat to invade the country that forced them aside.

Q: They really didn't have much of an army, did they?

NICHOLSON: No, they didn't, and they were aware of it. And so they took it as quite credible when those U.S. threats were finally made that they were likely to be carried out.

Q: What about the rest of Latin America? We had had a policy for some years of trying to keep high tech weapons out of Latin America, the idea being the fairly practical one of, if so and so gets a fancy military toy in one country, then the other country has to get that fancy military toy, and it means an awful lot of money going into military equipment which

probably would never be used and it's a waste of effort and also threatens neighbors and destabilizes. What were we doing?

NICHOLSON: Keep high tech weapons out of Latin America was our policy and it's one that was sustained while I was there, although from time to time you would have countries requesting such items, with some support from the local U.S. embassy which obviously was seeking to further relations with their host country. The interesting issue that arose while I was there was our effort to provide some modestly refurbished A-6 combat aircraft to the Argentines, an effort which met with very stubborn and persistent resistance on the part of the British, who had the Falklands War very fresh in mind and were opposed to any shipment of arms to the Argentines—even older generation aircraft which were of limited capability.

Q: Wasn't the A-6 a navy carrier attack plane?

NICHOLSON: It was a navy ground attack aircraft, and somewhat versatile in what it could be used for. But versatility doesn't necessarily imply much capability by current standards. What was proposed was to provide excess U.S. A-6's to Argentina at a fairly low price because the Argentines were not in an economic position to acquire things like F-16s—which we would not have sold them anyway—and to refurbish the A-6 aircraft with some updated but still fairly limited avionics. And we went through many rounds of discussions with the Argentines, within the interagency community, and within State between the Latin American Bureau on the one hand and the European Bureau on the other which came at this from very different perspectives, with the Political-Military Bureau trying to strike a balance and reach a consensus. Every time we thought we had moved the ball forward, the British would raise the issue at a high level meeting with a U.S. official and the word would come down to review this once more and so we were back to square one. After the Falklands War in 1982 we had essentially given the British a formal right of veto over U.S. military sales to Argentina. In the course of addressing the issue of whether to sell A-6 aircraft and in dealing with British objections which struck us, at least we in PM, as

overdrawn, we sought as well to curtail that right of veto so that the U.S. would not be continually bound up or limited in its ability to provide even minimal equipment to a country which at that time was very closely aligned with the U.S. under the Menem administration and was being very helpful to us in many ways. Our efforts to do away that that British veto upped the stakes in this matter and so it took a very long time to resolve and in fact had not been resolved as of when I left PM, but I believe the Argentines ultimately got their A-6s, albeit in a pretty stripped down form, and we also succeeded in diluting that British veto.

Q: The Soviet Union was coming apart while you were there. The Cold War was over. This meant that you had a Russia with lots of high tech military equipment which it wasn't planning to use, and they needed money. I would think this would have been a concern of them flooding the market with really fancy stuff.

NICHOLSON: This would have been a concern of some of our non-proliferation offices and of the regional bureaus. It was less a focus in my office because we were moving military equipment overseas or in some cases declining to transfer U.S. equipment so as to support U.S. conventional arms control efforts. The issue of what the Soviets might be peddling around the world was really less within our purview than other people's, although in a case or two, one could imagine if we had tightened up too much on military equipment sales or transfers, we could have faced the prospect that the requesting country might turn to an alternate supplier. But that's typically the exception rather than the rule because in those countries which have a traditional military supplier relationship, it is so institutionalized into their procurement and training systems that it becomes difficult for them suddenly to shift major suppliers and it becomes as well, whether intended or not, a potential political signal to the supplier country which they are abandoning. So it's not something that these countries do readily. I think the greater concern of the U.S. was not that those countries which were our traditional customers or aid recipients were going to shift to Soviet equipment. It was that the Soviets were going to start selling this material

to rogue states with which we had no and sought no military supply relationship, thereby allowing them to increase their capabilities on the cheap.

Q: What about relations with the Pentagon, the Department of Defense? I would think there would be a big push to pick up some money and get rid of surplus equipment, to sell tanks or planes or something to other countries to help our inventory problem. Did you find that you were coming at this as a State Department representative from a different perspective than the Defense Department?

NICHOLSON: Given the limited amount of discretionary dollars we had to spend on military assistance, we at State often viewed the transfer to other countries of U.S. excess equipment which could be provided at very low prices or for nothing as a way of augmenting the military assistance resources we had to pursue relationships with those countries. This came into play particularly in some of the countries in Latin America which we were seeking to assist with anti-narcotics efforts that were very expensive because they often involved aircraft for surveillance purposes or the intercept of narcotics laden aircraft. We didn't have a great many resources in dollars to do this compared to the task at hand, so we were often in the position of encouraging the Defense Department to declare some of their material excess as quickly as possible so that we could, in effect, get it into the military assistance system. That, of course, involved negotiations between us and the Defense Department as to which country was going to get the excess equipment, on what schedule, etc., because while in theory the Department of State had final decision-making authority over allocations, Defense was the agency which was ultimately going to declare equipment holdings excess or not and therefore they had a bargaining chip and a role. We had relatively few discretionary resources for security assistance because, in the aftermath of the Cold War, foreign aid and particularly security assistance were being dramatically scaled back from what they had been during President Reagan's first term and the early part of his second term. But what remained sacrosanct in the budget were our annual transfers to Israel and Egypt of something on the order of

$1.8 billion in military assistance to Israel and $1.3 billion to Egypt. When you subtracted out those sacred cows, it didn't leave a whole lot for the rest of the world.

Q: Did you note any change when the Clinton administration came in?

NICHOLSON: No, I did not notice any really significant change. In foreign policy, it's my impression that there was a reasonable degree of continuity between those administrations, much more so than one sees with the quite clear break between the Clinton administration and the current Bush administration. The latter certainly represents a definite dividing point. Taking the broadest view, one can see a difference between the Carter administration and the Reagan administration. One can see a difference between the Clinton administration and the Bush administration. But everything in between was more a matter of continuity than of major departures, as has usually been the case since the end of World War II,

Q: In East Asia, what were your main clients and what were the issues.

NICHOLSON: In East Asia, we had ongoing military assistance programs for the Philippines and for Thailand, although by that time they were approaching pretty modest levels because the military assistance budget as a whole had been whittled back and, to the extent we had discretionary funding, most of it was being moved into the drug wars in South America. In terms of issues, a perennial issue which was the subject of an annual meeting between a Taiwanese delegation and DOD with State participation was what military equipment we would or would not sell to the Taiwanese. We had a longstanding policy of seeking to meet their defense needs while avoiding unnecessary irritation to the government in Beijing, which meant not selling them genuinely offensive weapons. They were always pressing to purchase more than we were prepared to offer, so that was an annual issue. While I was there, I was not a direct participant, but on the sidelines and in interagency meetings I noted the progress or lack thereof in the Philippine base negotiations which ultimately failed and, at least with respect to Clark Air Force Base, were

eventually rendered irrelevant anyway by the eruption of Mount Pinatubo which made that air base unusable.

Q: While you were dealing with the Philippines, you left before the base negotiations ended, didn't you?

NICHOLSON: I was still there when they reached an impasse and broke down. The Filipinos were not going to move off their rather stiff demands and finally DOD got fed up and essentially said, “We're prepared to pull out and are going to pull out,” at which point you actually had people in State encouraging DOD to go back into the negotiations, because they were reluctant to see that part of the relationship with the Philippines pass from the scene. It was perhaps ironic that in this case DOD, which had originally told us, “We have to have these bases...we can't do without them,” finally after stalemated negotiations reached the conclusion by formal study that it in fact could do without the bases and then threw up its hands in frustration with the Filipinos and decided to clear out, at which point State, or at least some senior officials in the East Asia Bureau, tried to push military basing on the Defense Department as a way to maintain the depth and complexity of our overall relations with the Philippines. It was an interesting temporary reversal of roles.

Q: What were the readings, if any, you were getting from the Philippines as this impasse came? Was this expected to eventually end up in some sort of compromise or was it really a sea change?

NICHOLSON: At first it was assumed that while we were going to go through some ups and downs in the negotiations, in the end we would succeed as on previous occasions in renegotiating our presence at Clark and Subic, which extended back some 40 years. As time went along, however, people began to realize that there were probably enough “no” votes in the Philippine Senate to defeat a treaty. But you maintain a professional optimism and it persists perhaps longer than is justified precisely because if you're fighting for an

outcome, you have to kind of believe in its possibility in order to work effectively. But I think towards the end everyone on the U.S. side recognized that this was probably going to go nowhere. And it's at that point or even before that DOD commissioned this formal internal study as to whether they could get along with “places, not bases,” that is, a network of access arrangements for servicing and transit of ships and aircraft which would not require permanent U.S. installations on a large scale in Southeast Asia. And that's the mode they eventually adopted.

Q: The Taiwanese factor, giving Taiwan more defenses and all, is probably one of the most political subjects we deal with. Was this beyond your pay grade?

NICHOLSON: Yes. In terms of what we were going to provide them, those decisions were made at least at the Assistant Secretary level and often at the Secretary's level. It was recognized that such decisions were inevitably going to bring vigorous mainland Chinese complaint. There was a careful balance to be maintained. While typically it's phrased as a balance between meeting Taiwan's defense needs and avoiding unnecessary irritation to the mainland Chinese, I think another consideration, although never voiced openly, was that we did not want to give the Taiwanese so much military equipment that they would reach a state of confidence that might lead them to do something rash like formally declaring independence as a state distinct from mainland China and thereby courting the possibility of a forceful response from Beijing. We had to walk a careful line of maintaining the status quo of Taiwanese autonomy or de facto independence without encouraging Taipei to cross the formal lines, despite repeated provocations of Taipei by China, which always has sought to strangle Taiwan's diplomatic relations abroad.

Q: Were there any other issues while you were there?

NICHOLSON: I was not directly involved, but at that point the Clinton administration was determining what to do about the emergent North Korean nuclear program and seeking to develop a strategy of carrots and sticks, at that time more carrots than sticks, to persuade

Pyongyang to give up the program. These discussions went on around me but did not directly involve me because we were certainly not considering the provision of military assistance to North Korea. Civilian nuclear reactors? Yes. But military assistance? No.

Q: You left there in '93. This is a good place to stop. Where did you go?

NICHOLSON: I undertook a Pearson Program assignment and was seconded to Congress for a year, working as a legislative assistant on foreign affairs to Senator Jim Jeffords of Vermont, who at that time was a Republican member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee.

Q: Alright. We'll talk about that the next time.

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Today is October 10, 2003. From '93 to '94, you were working for Senator Jeffords. What were you doing and what was your estimate of him and of the work of the Senate?

NICHOLSON: I was undertaking the typical functions of a legislative assistant (LA), part of the time in tandem with his veteran legislative assistant on foreign affairs and defense policy, and for much of the year on my own since she went on maternity leave for an extended period. I was on his personal staff as versus the committee staff. It involved such things as preparing briefings and memos for his meetings dealing with foreign affairs, writing position papers on upcoming legislation with proposals as to how he should vote, writing speeches for his use on the floor of the Senate, drafting template responses on high-profile foreign policy issues which could then be turned over to his legislative correspondence staff for their use in replying to the multiple constituent inquiries and advocacy letters that would come in on those topics, and on occasion traveling with Senate fact-finding staff groups to countries overseas.

Q: This was during the early Clinton years. Where did Jeffords fit?

NICHOLSON: He competed for the unofficial title of most liberal Republican in the Senate. If you look at his voting record, I think he and Sen. John Chaffee of Rhode Island may have been neck and neck. It was a liberal voting record which reflected the traditions of the mid-Atlantic/New England wing of the Republican Party—what used to be known as the Rockefeller wing—and which also reflected the sentiments of his own state, which is politically very liberal. So he was sometimes in an uncomfortable position vis a vis his party leadership because he would have to vote against the grain on a number of issues, but at the same time parties value every single member they've got in the Senate, particularly in eras when the numbers on either side are closely divided and having 51 votes gives you purview over committee chairmanships and much more influence as the majority party. So, Sen. Jeffords was accepted by his Republican colleagues, but sometimes grudgingly when he had to vote the other way.

Q: Did you get any feel of some of the Republican heavyweights breathing on him?

NICHOLSON: I don't think they ever breathed too heavily. First, because that was an era when the degree of partisanship and attempted enforcement of party discipline was not as acute or with quite so sharp an edge as nowadays, and secondly because the Senate as an institution simply does not lend itself to that. Any individual senator really has more autonomy and more ability under the rules to stop legislation or otherwise impede the progress of the Senate, such that Senators are better able to act as individual entrepreneurs than is the case in the House of Representatives, which is bound by many rules designed to make it operable with a membership of 435 versus 100 and which therefore gives the House leadership much more authority to push legislation and potentially to punish recalcitrant members of their party who do not tow the line.

Q: Were there any particular issues that you got engaged in during this year?

NICHOLSON: Jeffords was, along with Senator Biden on the Democratic side, a very outspoken proponent of U.S. intervention in the Balkans Events were unfolding in the

former Yugoslavia and the ethnic cleansing if not genocide there was becoming more and more known in the West and yet the USG was really avoiding much of a response or a leadership role. Senator Jeffords, who is basically a liberal internationalist, a believer in multilateralism and the UN system, and a believer in humanitarian interventions, was much involved in Senate debates, trying to push the notion and provide political cover for the administration to take a more active military role in the Balkans.

Q: Was this turning into a partisan battle and who was on which side?

NICHOLSON: No, the issue divided both parties, and each position had advocates on both sides of the aisle. And on the Republican side, it wasn't only liberals like Jeffords who were advocating a more muscular policy. It put him in the rather ironic position of being allied to military hawks, which was not always the case. So, the issue didn't fall in any consistent way on a party line basis. It had more to do with the division between those who took an international view whether from the conservative side or liberal side and those with a more restrictive idea of American involvement abroad or of nation-building and so on.

Q: Did you deal with the Foreign Relations Committee staff?

NICHOLSON: Yes, to an extent. They were an impressive group. Typically, though not always, personal staff for individual members of the Senate rotate fairly quickly because often you have relatively young people who are looking to build a curriculum vitae, interested in getting experience in Washington, and willing to work under pretty crowded conditions in those offices up on the Hill (which are far more crowded than any executive department I have ever seen) and willing to work for the rather humble salaries that Senators are prepared to pay out of the overall office allowance that they're given. By contrast, Committee staff tend to have much greater longevity, they are somewhat less dependent on the whim of individual members for their employment, and they're better paid. There was a lot of experience reflected up there among staffers of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee. But some of them also had keen ideological axes to grind

because the Committee staff on the Republican side was determined by the chairman, Senator Jesse Helms, who had very strongly conservative views on various foreign policy issues.

Q: How did you find that Senator Helms' sway on international relations played to Jeffords and others?

NICHOLSON: Since Helms in most cases could count on a majority on his side in the Committee, he had a major voice, if not THE major voice, on the Committee. But not always. You had a number of Democrats on the Committee and then you had both Senators Jeffords and Lugar, Lugar being more to the center, who on occasion would join the Democrats. Jesse Helms didn't always get his way on the Committee, but he got it more often than not.

Q: Did you find that you had any problems dealing with some of the ideologues?

NICHOLSON: Not really. They recognized where Senator Jeffords was coming from and accepted as professionals that they were dealing with someone they couldn't necessarily count on to vote their way. From a purely personal standpoint, you'd have people who were more or less abrasive, more or less easy to work with. But that didn't break down along party or ideological lines.

Q: What did you come away from this with?

NICHOLSON: First, when you go from an executive department which is as hierarchically managed as the State Department, with lines of authority, the clearance process, and only a limited sphere of influence on the part of any one person, on the one hand it's refreshing but on the other hand appalling to see the degree of apparent chaos which characterizes the legislative process on the Hill. It is not structured in any fashion similar to the executive branch. At least from the standpoint of the individual Senator and his staff, it often tends to move at a breakneck pace since senators are up against a great

variety of issues, with many votes weekly, and they have to make decisions very quickly, with access to limited amounts of information. So there is a much greater potential for accidents to happen because, as compared to the executive branch, decision-making up there often takes place at a much more rapid pace and with benefit of less information to inform the decisions made by 100 people, most of whom are not specialists in the particular area of legislation or the question under consideration. As a staffer, you're an entrepreneur there. You are not managing a hierarchical process, pushing paper up. You're more involved in negotiating laterally with other staff or supporting negotiations among the Senators themselves, acting horizontally. There is an unstructured aspect to it which can be refreshing and allows greater initiative, but on the other hand gives one real pause about how decisions are sometimes made.

Q: One hears of senators spending so much time trying to raise money that they don't have much time for the substance. Did you find this with Jeffords?

NICHOLSON: No, because Senator Jeffords is blessed by coming from a small state where in large measure you can conduct a senatorial campaign on a face to face basis in small town meetings and the like and you are not so heavily dependent upon television media, which is the most costly element of campaigning. I believe his campaign for the Senate in 1994 while I was there cost on the order of $1.5-2 million. And that's a pittance compared to what would be spent on an election in California or Florida or many other states. So, no, he wasn't seized of that. But nonetheless, one is really amazed at the demands that are put on a senator, again in terms of trying to digest information to cast his vote on such an enormous range of legislative issues as come to the legislature of a country of then 240, now 280, million people. And in meeting constituents and interest groups who want to see him, taking appointments from all manner of other people wanting to see him, and returning to his state frequently. So, the- (end of tape)

The demands on a senator are equal to those of someone in the highest echelons of the Executive Branch. The other thing I found as a Foreign Service Officer was a bit humbling,

which is to say, we FSOs take ambassadorial nominations very seriously. For the most part, however, they are of far less interest to the senators who have to vote on them, unless the nominee has an absolutely awful record which makes him a political hot potato, and sometimes not even then, because for the most part the voting public at large are not interested in who is ambassador to Country X or Country Y. If those who do pay attention are in favor, it makes no difference to a senator if the fellow is a totally unqualified political appointee. The Senator is happy to satisfy his constituents and is not going to worry about a nominee whether qualified or unqualified so long as the person doesn't have a really black mark against him.

Q: When you were there, '93-'94, had the heavily publicized resignations of three Foreign Service officers come up?

NICHOLSON: No.

Q: In '94, whither?

NICHOLSON: Let me make one other observation about this period. I made Senate staff trips representing Jeffords to Guatemala and South Korea. But more interesting was a trip I made to Cuba as part of a fact-finding delegation of about nine Congressional staffers which had been organized by a left of center Washington think tank headed by retired Ambassador Robert White. White's organization favored a loosening or elimination of the U.S. trade embargo and was interested in familiarizing more Congressional staff members with the situation in Cuba in hopes of building support for that position. So, I joined and we went down to Cuba, spent about a week there, and had meetings with very senior officials, the ones who would typically be brought out on the circuit: Ricardo Alarcon, president of the Cuban assembly; the Cuban foreign minister, Roberto Robaina; and others. And then there were veiled hints along the way that we just might meet Fidel Castro. But the Cubans tend to hold that back as a bit of stage management to increase the sense of drama and/or gratitude at having been granted such an audience and/or because they can never tell

whether Fidel is going to approve his schedule from one day to the next so perhaps they just didn't want to make a commitment. Anyway, we were invited to a reception that was ostensibly hosted by another senior Cuban official. About a half an hour into it, Castro arrived with his entourage. We ended up gathering in a group of 8-9 staffers around Castro for 2 or 3 hours, which essentially turned into a monologue— not surprisingly I gather— in which there were occasional comments or questions from our group, each of which would touch off a long exposition by Castro acting in a professorial mode. I think he views himself as the professor, as much as the “commandante.” He certainly had that style. And he is very, very sharp. I tried to slip in one question that had potentially a veiled barb of some sort but which I thought was sufficiently masked not to create too much of a stir, and Castro picked up immediately on the possible direction in which this might go and inquired further as to what I was getting at. The man was brilliant but with very deep autocratic instincts and the conviction he was the fount of wisdom, as one could see just by the way he handled our group. Of course, the Cubans around him were in absolute awe, not just because Castro is an iconic historical figure but because he literally towers over them. The man was at least 6'3” and very well built. He is not only larger than life historically. He's larger physically than most of his countrymen.

Q: What came of this? What was the consensus as you all left there?

NICHOLSON: The majority of the group favored easing the embargo on Cuba, and many had been predisposed in that direction before they ever left Washington, but that sort of attitude is not the kind of thing that gets itself translated immediately when staff get back to the Hill. If it has any impact at all, it is in a longer range “water on the stone” approach to slowly altering mindsets, because the minds that really have to change are not those of the staff members but those of the senators or congressmen they work for and that is a long process, especially when it's influenced by domestic politics in the U.S., as—in the Cuban case—by the attitudes of the Cuban expatriate community and voters in Florida.

Q: Jorge Mas...

NICHOLSON: Mas Canosa.

Q: He was riding high.

NICHOLSON: He was a very powerful force, the leading voice of the Cuban community, and so he had a lot of political clout.

Q: Was this trip considered a sellout to the Cubans?

NICHOLSON: No, because it wasn't sponsored by the U.S. administration. It was simply a number of congressional staff members on a fact finding visit sponsored by a think tank in the States, which is commonly how this sort of thing is done. A lot of congressional travel is subsidized by interest groups or think tanks of one sort or another. Our visit in any case went in under the radar screen of Mas Canosa and his colleagues. I suspect they didn't accord it all that much importance even if they were aware of it.

Another observation of possible interest which I can offer from this period was how various foreign countries conducted their lobbying efforts on the Hill. There were three or four that were particularly adept at it. Everybody knows the formidable reputation of Israel's lobby and of AIPAC's clout in the Congress, but there are others. Taiwan was particularly effective because Taiwan had sponsored trips to Taipei for probably at least one or two staffers, if not more, in virtually every senatorial office on the Hill and presumably many of the House offices, as well. They were willing to go to great lengths and expenditure to build a familiarity and a greater sympathy with Taiwan. In fact, they achieved a lot of success. The other lobby which was quite effective because it was willing to put money into politics was the Armenian lobby, which is always interested in questions involving Turkey but at that time was especially interested in making sure the U.S. cut off aid to Azerbaijan, with which Armenia was involved in a conflict, even though the fault probably lay as much or more with Armenia. The Armenian lobby was effective through the Congress in keeping the aid tap to Azerbaijan turned off in a way which really impeded the

administration's efforts to resolve or improve the situation out there. And the Greek lobby was pretty effective as well in pushing its issues, especially as related to Greek quarrels with Turkey.

Q: I look forward to the day when we have a Korean lobby, a Filipino lobby, and an Indian lobby. It's sure to happen.

In '94, whither?

NICHOLSON: I took a fill-in job because I was due to go out to Bangkok again but that was not to occur until summer of '95. I worked for 6-8 months as the analyst for Thailand, Burma, and Cambodia, in INR.

Q: What were we seeing in Burma and Cambodia?

NICHOLSON: That was the period when the Khmer Rouge, having been expelled from power in Cambodia years before, still survived as a guerrilla group occupying a portion of western Cambodia. There was an effort on the part of the administration to cut off their access to markets in Thailand, where sales of timber from Khmer Rouge-held territory helped to finance and sustain the movement. And there was congressional legislation that ordained various sanctions on Thailand absent a good faith effort on the part of that government to close the border to such sales. It required a report to congress making an administration determination as to whether Thailand had made such an effort. I worked on that together with the Thai desk; it involved sleuthing through a great deal of material, including intelligence reports, and finally coming to conclusions.

Burma was the ongoing sorry story that has continued without major change one way or the other since the military overthrew the democratically elected government there in 1988, or I should say precluded the democratically elected government from taking office. Ever since we have sought by one means or another, slowly but surely tightening the screws we had, which were fairly limited in the first place, to press the Burmese military to come

to some accommodation with the democratic forces in that country to restore democratic government and also do something about the narcotics trade, since Burma is the world's largest or second largest producer of opium. That title has gone back and forth periodically between the Burmese and the Afghans depending upon the situation, but at that time Burma held the record. There was something of a debate in the administration between those who wanted to engage more with the Burmese to pursue an anti-narcotics agenda, believing that we might be able to work with the generals to stem opium cultivation, and those on the other hand who put emphasis on the human rights failures in Burma and the need to press with sanctions and isolation of the regime if necessary to encourage moves towards democracy. The players were typically the narcotics community on one side, particularly DEA and the President's Office of Narcotics Control, and on the other side the State Department and especially the NSC. Not surprisingly given the strong feelings on the subject in the NSC, emphasis on democracy and human rights was the position that prevailed.

Q: You were in INR itself?

NICHOLSON: Yes.

Q: How did you find INR at that point? It waxes and wanes in influence. Did you all feel that it was a bureau that was producing something that was being used?

NICHOLSON: I believe so. My office dealt with analysis of East Asia. To perhaps an unusual degree, a couple of our officers became operationally involved because, being longtime experts on North Korea, they were invited to form part of the U.S. delegations which went out to negotiate with the North Koreans during the initial effort by the Clinton administration to come to an agreement that would lead the North Koreans to close the reactors they had been using, so we believed, to produce fissile material for nuclear weapons. So, they were not only involved as analysts in backgrounding policymakers but in some instances formed part of the delegations going out there.

Q: In '95, off to Bangkok. You were there from when to when?

NICHOLSON: I was there from summer of '95 until the summer of '98.

Q: You had been there before. What did you go out as?

NICHOLSON: I was the number two in the political section and was dealing with foreign policy issues, rather than the domestic reporting and political-military issues I had dealt with the first time around.

Q: What was the Thai government like in this period?

NICHOLSON: It was a democratically elected government. The military, which had overthrown the Thai government in 1991, backed out of politics in '92 or '93 after bloody confrontations in the streets of Bangkok which were in part a reaction to an attempt by the coup leader to perpetuate himself in office as prime minister. Those conflicts had given the military pause, a greater sense of restraint, perhaps a sense of actual weakness, and so they were less prone to intervene in politics and the way was paved for the return of a democratic government, which continued in office while I was there.

Q: Who was the ambassador?

NICHOLSON: It was Will Itoh during my time there. He was a career diplomat.

Q: How did he run his embassy?

NICHOLSON: He took a fairly strategic view. He was quite willing to delegate and kept his focus on the key questions which he thought important. That may have reflected his background, which was heavily oriented towards the 7th floor in the State Department with which he had had a lot of experience. So, he was not a micromanager but at the same time he was hands on when it came to major issues with which he needed to become more involved. And he made it his mission to obtain a visit by President Clinton as a

way of reassuring the Thais of continued U.S. interest and support, the better to smooth over their sense of grievance that the U.S. had not offered more help to Thailand during its financial meltdown leading to the Asian financial crisis. He succeeded in obtaining a Presidential visit while I was there, no doubt in part because his previous assignment had been as Executive Secretary of the National Security Council, so he had the right contacts.

Q: You mentioned you were doing foreign relations. It's hard to think of Thailand and foreign relations. You hardly ever hear of Thailand having a strong foreign relations initiative. During this period, what were you talking about?

NICHOLSON: Much of it was not so much Thai-U.S. foreign relations, although of course there was always this, that, or the other issue arising in international fora, be it the United Nations or elsewhere, in which we lobbied for Thai support. But it was more specifically border relations, namely along the Thai-Burmese border and along the Thai-Cambodian border, which impacted events as much in Burma and Cambodia as in Thailand itself.

On the Thai/Burmese border, we were concerned that large numbers of ethnic refugees, particularly 100,000 or more Karen refugees who had taken refuge on the Thai side of the border in the wake of Burmese military campaigns to quell unrest in the ethnic areas, be afforded humanitarian refuge in Thailand. We viewed those Burmese campaigns as part and parcel of the military dictatorship's effort to get a grip on the country. So, although there was never support in the U.S. government for anything but a unified, if conceivably federalized, Burmese state, there was considerable sympathy for insurgent groups that were part of a larger coalition including Aung San Suu Kyi, the leader of the ethnic Burman democratic movement, in pressing the military for reform. Those groups in the '80s and the '90s came under much greater military pressure than they ever had before from Rangoon. So the refugee influx became of concern. At the same time, there was an active democracy movement in exile in Bangkok made up mainly of ethnic Burmans but also including some representatives of tribal ethnic groups who had not stopped at the border but had made their way to the capital in Bangkok. These Bangkok exiles

focused on publicity to try to keep the Burmese situation before the world, to transmit news of what was going on inside Burma, which was not always easy to get given the Burmese government's control over media, and they had good relations with the rather large international press corps based in Bangkok. The Thai government's attitude towards these groups was ambivalent. On the one hand, the Thai were sympathetic in some ways to the aspirations to democracy in Burma. But on the other hand, the presence of these groups and their activities potentially complicated Thailand's relations with the powers that be in Rangoon. So, there was an ambiguous policy and never the certainty that the Thais were going to continue to afford de facto political asylum to these groups. The U.S. government was urging them to do so. So, I frequently was involved with that, be it in general terms or with regard to specific cases of Burmese who had been picked up by the Thai police and appeared on the verge of being returned to Burma.

Q: Let's take a case. Mr. X is picked up. What would you do?

NICHOLSON: Mr. X is picked up. One of my embassy colleagues who dealt more broadly with refugee issues would start working the phones to his contacts, particularly in the interior ministry. Then I would start calling the Thai foreign ministry and occasionally the prime minister's office to encourage those upper echelons to prevent the authorities from refouling a refugee, hoping that the basic policy had not changed or at least remained ambiguous enough to allow my contacts to continue to provide shelter to these people and that somebody lower down among the police or whatever was just acting out of line. But you could never be quite sure whether that was the case or whether the Thai government was attempting to send a message to some of these groups to keep a lower profile and mind their political behavior in Thailand. I felt very sorry for the exiles. Some of them, particularly representatives of the All Burma Students' Democratic Front, were in their 20s, young, well educated, and highly talented...just what a woefully undeveloped country like Burma needed. But they had pretty much burnt their bridges there, and realistically I foresaw little likelihood of enough political progress in Burma over the next several decades to make it safe for them to return...except as abject co-optees. So, though I never

voiced it, I feared they were destined to become permanent exiles after investing much of their best years and talent in a lost cause. Which is not to deny that I admired their idealism.

Q: The Cambodian side?

NICHOLSON: There, the issue once more was tracking the situation with regard to alleged Thai contacts with the Khmer Rouge leadership, who controlled a strip of Cambodian territory adjacent Thailand and at least in earlier years had largely financed their insurgency through the sale of timber from Cambodian forests over the border into Thailand. We were interested in helping the government in Phnom Penh bring an end to that insurgency, and cutting off the Khmer Rouge's sources of finance was one aspect of that. I made a number of trips to the Thai border, investigatory trips, to try to determine whether border authorities and the Thai military were turning a blind eye, if not conniving, in such imports, or whether in fact our efforts, including mine, in urging the Thai government on many occasions to try to cut this off were having an effect. Although the record was a bit mixed, the overall trend during this period was for the Thais significantly to tighten the border. I suspect that was due in part to international pressures and perhaps also to a conclusion on the part of the Thais that the Khmer Rouge were a fading force and no longer something that Thailand had to reckon with and conciliate much in order to avoid trouble on the border. Because earlier Thai dealings with the Khmer Rouge had not been, I believe, merely a matter of individual corruption, though that was part of it. They reflected also an effort by authorities, at least at the local level, to keep the border quiet and avoid potential clashes with the Khmer Rouge.

Q: The clock had moved along.

NICHOLSON: Yes. The classic Thai approach to their borders has always been one reflecting the national character and a strategy dating back to at least the 19th century which I described in an earlier interview as bending with the wind and reaching an

accommodation. Thailand before it was a nation with defined borders was defined more by those agglomerations of people, be they Thai or other ethnic groups, who paid loyalty or homage to the Thai king. So, a sense of strict territorial boundaries and inviolable geographic frontiers is something fairly recent in Thai history. Therefore, the Thais were willing to accept a certain porosity in their borders (many of which are or were in remote, thinly populated zones) and yield on certain issues on the borders and conciliate forces just across the borders rather than going to the expenditure of money and potentially blood to quell the kind of unrest that could be caused by unruly groups who were not appeased or conciliated or stabilized in some way. That has been the traditional policy. It was used on the Burmese border for a long time through Thai links to the ethnic insurgent groups while they held sway on the border, but as the Burmese army began to assert a presence on the frontier and was in a position to cause the Thais as much, if not more, trouble than the ethnic insurgent groups, Thai policy towards those groups began to harden. As a result, our work in trying to maintain some space in Thailand for Burmese pro-democracy and/or exile groups, be they Aung San Suu Kyi's people and similar groups in Bangkok or be they ethnic refugees on the Burmese border, was made more difficult.

Q: Were there any major incidents or problems that you had to deal with?

NICHOLSON: Towards the end of my tour, there was a minor civil war in Cambodia in the capital, Phnom Penh, between the two rival political factions there. Prince Ranariddh's supporters in the FUNCINPEC party and militia apparently attempted foolishly to mount a coup against the stronger government of Prime Minister Hun Sen. The coup failed and, within a day or two, FUNCINPEC forces were driven out of the city after some fighting. The conflict prompted the U.S.-assisted evacuation of the American community in Phnom Penh. Because our embassy there was small - in fact, there was only one officer in the political section - several of us were sent from AmEmbassy Bangkok to assist and augment their personnel. So, I found myself flying by embassy (actually DAO) jet into Phnom Penh about a day, maybe two days, after the fighting had moved from the city out

into the countryside and, in the course of two separate periods, I spent about six or seven weeks in Phnom Penh.

An observation and an anecdote. The situation in the city calmed down rather quickly and indeed was probably safer beginning about two days after the attempted coup than it had been during the months, if not years, leading up to it when both of these political factions were present in the city with armed militia. In the wake of the coup, one faction, that headed by the still prime minister of Cambodia, Hun Sen, clearly dominated militarily and so there was really no likelihood of anybody being caught in a crossfire because he was 100% in control. But images of the first days of fighting continued to be repeated over and over again on CNN and other TV networks back in the United States, which of course got the attention of the policymakers in the State Department who kept pressing our Ambassador in Phnom Penh, Ken Quinn, as to whether an ordered evacuation of embassy dependents and non-essential personnel was called for. Quinn argued strongly that, no, it was not necessary and it was potentially disruptive to families and to the work of the embassy and so on. But eventually he was simply overruled because the powers that be at the State Department seemed to be more impressed with the film footage they were getting on CNN, however outdated, than they were by the reporting cables they were receiving from their own embassy, which is an interesting illustration of the influence of television on perceptions in Washington.

Q: Also, it reflects that well known reflex within the government of "cover your ass." If it looks like somebody's going to get hurt and if it's a choice between getting them out or staying, if somebody gets hurt, then it's your fault and "Why did you let this happen?"

NICHOLSON: That's true, although let it be said that perhaps not then but certainly now, legislation makes the ambassador personally responsible and thus one would think he would be the first person to advise an evacuation rather than the last one.

An anecdote. It became clear that there was not going to be any guerrilla resistance within the city itself, so security concerns were limited to routine criminality. Nonetheless, to be safe rather than sorry, it was ordained that when I was being driven at night from the embassy to the hotel where I stayed, I'd be accompanied by an armed guard riding in the front passenger seat. I remember with some amusement that as we were going back one night, this fellow had a disconcerting habit of cradling his M-16 on his knee in such a way that the muzzle was pointed directly at my head as I rode in the back seat. Hopefully the safety catch was on, but I couldn't confirm that in the dark. Phnom Penh at that time and probably still has streets that are filled with deep potholes. I could just envisage the car abruptly hitting a jarring pothole and that M-16 going off. So I made a point of moving my head enough to the left/right so that at worst the bullet would exit harmlessly out the rear windshield. I thought at the time how ironic it was that, having arrived in Phnom Penh supposedly in the midst of a civil war, my biggest danger was having my head blown off by my own security guard.

Q: What about relations with Laos, Thai relations? Were we concerned with anything that was happening with Laos?

NICHOLSON: The Thais and the Laotians had patched up their relations since the late '80s when they had a minor border war in which the Thais lost. The Thai emphasis now was on developing better relations and bringing Laos, Burma, and Vietnam—the three principal Southeast Asian countries who were not already members of the six-nation ASEAN group—into ASEAN, hopefully to create a Greater Southeast Asia community which, among other advantages, might buffer the region against the prospect of expanding Chinese influence, especially in Burma. As the Thais saw it, such ASEAN expansion would also stabilize relations with Vietnam, which had been a historic enemy of Thailand, and would fulfill a trend over 10-15 years of slowly improving relations, especially as Vietnam itself became more open to outside approaches, having tried to open itself to the world by normalizing relations with the United States, inviting foreign investment,

and liberalizing or at least claiming to have liberalized its economy. So, the relationship between the Thais and the Laotians was quite good during this period.

Our own relations with Laos were in a stage of development by fits and starts, which were handled not by Bangkok but by the American embassy in Vientiane. But of course we were aware of AmEmbassy Vientiane's efforts. It was a difficult process because the U.S. was dealing with a country which, though it in a way wanted to open up to the world, was still a quite insular place and heavily influenced by old style Soviet ideology so that changes came slowly and, as I understand it, have still not come fully to fruition. The U.S. came close, we thought, to achieving a trade and investment pact with the Laotians which would have entailed considerable reforms to their economy, but as far as I am aware they have backed out of that. So, relations are still incomplete.

Q: China?

NICHOLSON: To the extent that China was on our radar screen, it was as a country attempting to expand its sphere of influence in Southeast Asia. The ASEAN countries, in turn, through their efforts to build a more unified Southeast Asian community, were trying to enhance their bargaining power with the Chinese. The principal outstanding dispute from a territorial standpoint then and now has to do with excessive Chinese claims for an exclusive economic zone (EEZ) in the South China Sea, and for sovereignty over the Spratly Islands, which in turn would buttress China's EEZ claims. The Chinese claim the Spratlys, as do the Vietnamese and, in whole or in part, two other members of ASEAN, the Philippines and Malaysia. Chinese claims in earlier years had occasioned an armed conflict on the sea with the Vietnamese and at one point great tension between the Filipinos and the Chinese when the Chinese occupied an island in the Spratlys claimed by the Filipinos. The concern was firstly that this was an attempted resource grab because the general perception, although not proven at that time and I'm not sure it's been proven yet, is that there may be very large hydrocarbon deposits under the South China Sea and the Chinese were trying to exclude everyone else from a claim over a portion of those.

The other ASEAN concern was to maintain unimpeded navigation rights through the South China Sea necessary for Southeast Asia's connection to certain key trading partners, including Japan. So, the expansion of ASEAN was aimed in part at trying to create a more united front, although they would never call it that, with which to negotiate with the Chinese for some kind of equitable solution out of fear that if they dealt with the Chinese as relatively small individual states, they would have very little leverage.

Q: Did Japan have a very active policy in Thailand?

NICHOLSON: Only in the sense of investment. The Japanese invested heavily in Thailand in the late '80s/early '90s. They had a large expatriate business community there to run those investments. They tended to use Southeast Asia at that time as a fabricator of components for assembly in Japan, and for outsourcing manufactured goods that could no longer be produced at competitive prices in Japan itself given labor costs there, a phenomenon similar to what we see in the United States in the export of jobs to Mexico and elsewhere abroad.

Q: During this time, did you see any indicators that India was trying to expand its influence? It's got the Bay of Bengal and the Indian Ocean. In a way it's a rival to China.

NICHOLSON: Not that I recall. The Indians were always very keenly interested in anything that might suggest the Chinese were acquiring naval base rights in the Indian Ocean region, particularly in Burma. There were occasional reports suggesting that something along the latter lines might be afoot, but they were never proven during my time. It was clear that the Indians kept a close eye on that. However, in terms of their own presence in the Southeast Asian region, it did not expand significantly during this period. The Indians remained fixated on the Pakistanis, to the other side of their country.

Q: Did the king play any role while you were there in foreign affairs?

NICHOLSON: Not in foreign affairs. He played a decisive role during the events subsequent to the 1991 military coup. Those events took place not long after I had left Thailand, so I was aware of them. The military had thrown out the democratic government and established a junta acting as a board of directors supervising a largely civilian technocratic government. Then the person who had been most responsible for the coup, General Suchinda Kraprayoon, began maneuvering to maintain a more permanent hold on power - (end of tape)

More specifically, the army backed the formation of a new political party which ran in the parliamentary elections promised by the military, which of course always claimed that its rule was simply a transitional necessity rather than a permanent state of affairs. But it was transparent that Suchinda and his backers were seeking to create an instrument whereby he could secure the prime ministership for the long term. When he in fact was named prime minister, it generated opposition and eventually there were mass demonstrations on the streets of Bangkok which the army put down with the loss of hundreds of lives. Finally, the king stepped in, summoning to the palace both Suchinda and the leader of the opposition group who was himself a retired military officer, and as they knelt on their knees before him he delivered not exactly a scolding but a directive that they resolve differences and end this standoff. This royal interview was nationally televised. That was the end of General Suchinda's effort to retain power and it broke the political crisis, in essence discrediting Suchinda, as did, of course, the blood that had been shed in Bangkok. It paved the way for the normal political parties to run in succeeding elections and a legitimate rather than an army-inspired parliamentary government to come to office. That's an example of how the king on rare occasion has exercised decisive influence at turning points in Thai domestic political life. But in terms of foreign policy, the royal family always has taken a fairly hands off stance, in part because I don't think there has been anything in Thai foreign policy that would lead them to great alarm. Thailand since World War II has always been first and foremost a close ally and security partner of the United

States, and that certainly would not be at all offensive to the royal family, which in fact has a number of close ties and friendships in the United States, including in Washington.

Q: How was life in Bangkok during this time? It was still the sex playground for lots of Europeans and Japanese. Also the traffic and all that. Had things changed?

NICHOLSON: At the beginning, the traffic situation was even worse than it had been in the late '80s/early '90s because Thailand experienced a great economic boom in the '90s in part thanks to all of the foreign investment, especially Japanese investment, which was pouring in, and in part through a speculative bubble which especially stimulated the construction industry and real estate sector. So, many more people were gaining the economic wherewithal to purchase automobiles and there were more cars on the roads and yet the infrastructure was not improving. They had some projects planned but the gestation time for these projects was very long in part because not infrequently there were elements of corruption associated with the awarding of contracts and therefore, if you had a change of government, the next government would insist on examining more closely all of those contracts and starting from square one all over again—perhaps, if one wants to be cynical, in order to guarantee that it would get a share of some of the under the table payments associated with the projects. So, the traffic situation was bad. But it was a boom city during the first year or two that I was there.

Then came the Asian economic crisis which actually originated with the floating of the Thai baht as a currency and its free fall, which then began to ricochet through other financial markets in Asia and elsewhere. That brought a halt or a virtual halt to much of the construction in Bangkok, which had been financed by bank loans that were not well supported by the economic fundamentals and which were promptly cut off, especially when the banks themselves experienced a cash flow crisis. Much of the credit system froze up. So, by the end of my period there, which was '98, there was a much more somber outlook, unlike the period of what Alan Greenspan would have called “irrational exuberance” and great optimism in the mid-'90s.

Q: When you arrived there, was anyone saying, "You know, the Thai economy is due for a big fall?" Were we looking at this?

NICHOLSON: To be honest, I don't know whether the U.S. approached the Thais, but the IMF and/or the World Bank on a couple of occasions expressed concern to them that things were getting out of control and that there were signs that matters were headed for a crash. There were some troubling economic indices that both we and the World Bank noticed six months or a year out. But I doubt that anybody anticipated that the reversal of the economy and the free fall of the Thai currency would be as dramatic as it was and certainly they were not anticipating the domino effect that reached so many other countries. The presumption I'm sure was that a recession in Thailand would be largely confined to Thailand and not have that many implications for other countries simply because the Thai economy was not a large enough player in the global market. What they missed was the demonstration effect this would have on investors around the world and the psychological impact it would have as people began to pull out of Third World markets, emerging economies, as investment vehicles for their mutual funds or what have you because they did not differentiate between one Third World country and another and simply began to pull back to safety to First World investments, fleeing Third World economies across the board, such that some of those economies suffered even though their economic fundamentals were not at all bad. This fact was at the origin of many of Malaysian Prime Minister Mahathir's complaints about the international financial system and the need in some way to regulate investment capital flows, something which was anathema to the United States but reflected real frustration in Kuala Lumpur that Malaysia was being penalized by the whimsy or the capriciousness of foreign investors for reasons that had nothing whatsoever to do about the state of the Malaysian economy.

Q: What about life there? There was a booming sex trade. Particularly the impact on families, was that a problem during this period?

NICHOLSON: To an extent. Actually, I'll be brief because we discussed this in the context of my first tour in Thailand. The situation had not changed. There were two possible concerns, one theoretical because I'm not aware of what, if any, affairs may have been going on, but there was always a possibility that you'd have family strains or breakups because a husband was out philandering in a capital where it would be very easy to do so, given the inclination. But what was certainly real and reflected in the embassy community was concern for children there and especially the easy availability of narcotics. In particular, by the mid to late '90s, Thailand was awash with methamphetamines. The latter had begun to be produced by drug lords who were under greater and greater pressure from opium eradication campaigns and were looking for something that might be easier to produce and market and so they set up large factories to produce amphetamines and similar items along the Thai border, mainly inside Burma but in a couple cases possibly inside Thailand itself. It became a social issue not just for the American community but for the Thais, who were very concerned that their own youth were becoming heavily addicted or exposed.

Q: How about AIDS? By this time, I guess AIDS had reached epidemic proportions around the world.

NICHOLSON: It had. At that time, Thailand had what was then a relatively high AIDS rate but in retrospect is low by comparison with what we have discovered now in African countries which appear most heavily hit. But for the time, it seemed a high incidence, possibly because the Thais - and one gives them credit for thiws - were among those relatively few countries which fairly early on took a very proactive role in both detection and education, not trying to hide the epidemic under the carpet but getting it out in the open in an effort to educate people towards preventive measures, condom distribution and so on. They had one of the most sophisticated programs in the world, and I presume still do. Of course, they were also working at cross purposes with a culture in which it was traditionally almost standard operating procedure for husbands to have mistresses

or to consort with prostitutes. Prostitution was and is a large industry. In fact, the Thais themselves refer to it as an “industry,” the sex industry, and it flourished long before Thailand became a destination point for foreign “sex tourism.” And so that creates a situation ripe for the spread of disease unless a great effort is made to counteract it through the use of condoms and what have you. So, the Thais were very vulnerable but at the same time they were active in social and educational measures trying to deal with it.

Q: You left Thailand in '98. Whither?

NICHOLSON: I went to the U.S. embassy in Brasilia, where I was the Counselor for Environmental, Scientific, and Technological Affairs—EST.

Q: You did that for how long?

NICHOLSON: I was there for a little under two years. I left in February of 2000.

Q: That's quite a change.

NICHOLSON: It was. I had spent most of my career dealing with political and political-military affairs mixed in with intelligence matters. I was looking to do something different. Also, I determined that if I wanted to remain in the State Department for a more extended period, I was going to have to make the senior threshold and the route to do that during the period of anemic promotion numbers in the '90s, especially of political cone officers, was to take a multifunctional position. This assignment took me out of the political cone and would have better qualified me to compete had I chosen to remain in the Department.

Q: How did Brasilia strike you?

NICHOLSON: It was very different from when I had been there 21 years earlier. It had matured a lot. For one thing, the city was relatively green, having been planted with trees

and so on, whereas 20 years earlier, the vegetation was thin and so one was plagued incessantly by this red dust.

Q: I remember seeing this French movie where it looked like just one big red construction site.

NICHOLSON: Yes. The monumental core of the city, which is organized along a great axis analogous to the Washington Mall, was not much changed. Those were among the first buildings to be constructed when Brasilia was founded. But the residential areas had expanded greatly and building sites which had been vacant when I was there the first time, including much of the northern half of the city, were now for the most part occupied by apartment buildings and shopping complexes, in accordance with the original plans for the city worked out in the 50s.

Brasilia had changed in another way. Because the country had opened itself up economically and reduced somewhat its import barriers, foreign consumer goods were much more readily available than they had been. You had somewhat more entertainment facilities in Brasilia—many more movie theaters, for instance. I think when I was there the first time there might have been two movie theaters in the whole town. There were cineplexes all over the place when I arrived in '98, most of them of fairly recent origin because it was only in the early 90s that Brazil made the real move to open up its economy, internationalize it, and go for a model of global competition to grow through exports rather than depending so heavily on the domestic market by blocking foreign imports and sheltering local industry. So Brasilia was a much more livable city, although still ultimately a rather boring place because there wasn't that much in the way of high culture. Embassies which in the '70s and early '80s had sponsored many musical and theatrical groups, bringing them to Brasilia to perform, had cut back their cultural programs, whether for budgetary or other reasons I'm not certain. And there did not seem to be enough of a Brasilia audience among Brazilians themselves to support high quality

indigenous cultural institutions. As a result, the city culturally had not much more to offer than it did in the mid-'70s.

Q: Who was the ambassador when you were there?

NICHOLSON: We had a couple of Charg#s because the previous ambassador, Mel Levitsky, had left sometime before but we were going through one of those instances where, because of bureaucratic procedures in Washington or difficulties in getting Senate approval of a nomination, we were without an ambassador in Brazil for an extended period. For my first year or so, the Charg# was Jim Derham. Eventually he finished his tour and went on to be DCM in Mexico and was replaced as Charg# by another career officer, Gerard (otherwise known to everybody as Jerry) Gallucci. About a year and a half after I had arrived and more than a year and a half after the last ambassador, Levitsky, had left, we finally received a full-ranked ambassador, Anthony Harrington, who was a political appointee. I left two weeks after he arrived.

Q: You had environmental and science concerns.

NICHOLSON: Yes.

Q: Environment and Brazil, you had a major hot potato, didn't you? Weren't we always pressing the Brazilians to do the right thing in the Amazon and other things of this nature?

NICHOLSON: Yes. It wasn't a 24 hour a day campaign nagging on specific issues such as illegal logging of mahogany. Rather, we were encouraging Brazil to implement steps it had already taken on paper to develop a way of better tracking logs to prevent illegal logging. Or, for instance, we were enhancing Brazilian abilities to detect large fires in the Amazon and to make the most effective allocation of resources to fight them. We were not so much in a critical mode as in gently cajoling and trying to offer real assistance on these issues. Number one, because simply sitting back and critiquing Brazil for sins in the Amazon would not have gotten us anywhere. Brazilians are very nationalistic and they

are very wary of outside attempts to claim a right of supervision over their management of the Amazon region. There is a long-standing Brazilian paranoia in a number of quarters that sinister outside forces somehow want to seize the Amazon from Brazil to exploit its resources. This reflects a couple of things. First, it reflects the fact that the Brazilian government in many cases has a very thin administrative structure on the ground in much of the Amazon and therefore does not feel fully confident that it has effectively occupied the territory. Such vacuums historically have begged to be filled. In fact, Brazil itself in the late 19th century acquired a large portion of land that was previously Bolivian territory simply because Brazilian settlers moved in there and the Bolivians, seeing the writing on the wall, agreed to a Brazilian proposal that the territory be sold. Secondly, Brazil has painful historical experience. For instance, with biological piracy. The Brazilian rubber boom of the 1890s which created great wealth for the country and is responsible for that famous opera house in Manaus 1,000 or more miles up the Amazon River from the Atlantic, was brought to an abrupt halt when a British subject managed to smuggle Brazilian rubber seeds out of the country to Kew Gardens near London, where they were propagated, eventually sent to the Royal Botanical Gardens in Ceylon, and finally used as the seed stock for large rubber plantations in Malaya. Those plantations quickly put the Brazilian industry out of business, since the latter was based upon tapping randomly scattered rubber trees in the forest, rather than on more efficient plantation row-crop agriculture. So, Brazil has always been very wary of outsiders trying to tell it what to do in the Amazon. But in fact, we had and have a number of cooperative programs with the Brazilians. USAID is involved down there helping to deal with the fire issue in the Amazon. NASA has a large research program in the Amazon on tropical ecology and cooperates with Brazil on remote sensing issues. So, there were a number of initiatives that we had underway bearing on the Amazon, seeking to act more in a helpful than an accusatory way.

Q: What were your main concerns?

NICHOLSON: They were project concerns. Brazil is a very bureaucratic environment in which to work, a maddeningly complex bureaucracy with a penchant for rule-making which ties itself up in knots. So, troubleshooting to get the project agreements signed and then implemented, and troubleshooting often in quite mundane ways, was really the meat and potatoes of the job and something that had to be done if in fact anything was to happen on the ground. I remember the plague for us all, both myself and my Brazilian counterparts, was the Brazilian customs service, which is a law unto itself. It was very difficult to import items duty free into the country for scientific research, etc., without jumping through a million hoops and/or signing agreements that almost rose to the level of treaty agreements, which in the Brazilian system, as in our own, can take years to get through the legislature. So, working in one way or another around these problems to maintain the supply of equipment for these projects absorbed a lot more of my time than I ever expected or wanted.

Q: Sometimes dealing with a customs service is really dealing with a not friendly foreign power.

NICHOLSON: Right. They are a power unto themselves and in Brazil they are really not much interested in what any other Brazilian ministry thinks, requests, or what have you. Even if you have the support of the Science Ministry or the Foreign Ministry, it may not avail you much. So, in effect, you begin looking with your Brazilian ministerial counterparts to find some way around the customs service.

Q: You didn't run your own private unmarked planes?

NICHOLSON: No, we didn't do that. Interestingly enough, we did have one project involving NASA that brought down an aircraft of theirs called the ER2, which is a reconfigured U-2, in order to do atmospheric research over the Amazon. NASA was trying to determine the frequency and severity of lightning discharges and how that affects chemical conversion of the atmosphere. The Amazon was one of several places

worldwide where they wanted to take such measurements. It's a perfect example of the bureaucratic tangle that one can encounter because we had signed an agreement with the Brazilians after a long negotiation to allow the deployment of that aircraft. But then almost on the eve of its scheduled arrival in the country, with all of the investment and logistical preparations already having been made and with certain calendar dates required to be met or at least not delayed by very much, we were told by the Brazilian military when we requested the aircraft flight clearances—a last step which we thought would be pro forma and routine—that under an obscure clause of the Brazilian constitution any foreign aerial reconnaissance mission in Brazil requires the personal approval of the president of Brazil. And so transpired a scramble to get the decision memoranda out of the Science Ministry or the Foreign Ministry and up the various chains to the president for his approval, and then to track the matter back down through various layers to make sure that the president's order actually arrived on the desk of the sergeant who was going to be on the issuing end of this flight clearance document. A lot of legwork, a lot of bureaucratic turnings of the wheel and energy exhausted and, one is tempted to say, wasted—but without that and without that sergeant's signature, nothing would have happened. It's telling of the working environment in Brazil that although there is absolutely no comparison in size between the Amazon on the one hand and Costa Rica's tropical forests, the amount of international scientific tropical research going on in Costa Rica is considerably greater than in Brazil, simply because the working environment in Costa Rica makes it easier for foreign researchers and institutions to implement projects and therefore they tend to gravitate in that direction.

I also spent a good deal of time dealing with NASA and the Brazilian Space Agency on matters related to Brazil's participation in the International Space Station. Brazil had pledged to provide one or two smaller components to the Station and there was a prospective Brazilian astronaut undergoing training in Houston, but the program ran into repeated delays and finally—after my time there—was quietly dropped by Brazil due

primarily to budget constraints which precluded them from developing and producing the agreed components.

Last but not least, I was kept busy, and rather frustrated, by the task of setting up an “Environmental Hub” in Brasilia, one of a global network of perhaps seven or eight such offices which were the brainchild of former Senator and later Undersecretary of State for Global Affairs Timothy Wirth. The idea was that these offices would help catalyze regional responses to environmental problems which could not be easily addressed by nations working alone. I frankly was not in sympathy with the idea. The offices had enough initial spending money to support some networking efforts and regional conferences, which might be helpful in inspiring or even launching initiatives. But it appeared that thereafter the Hubs would become fifth wheels and mainly bystanders to host nation efforts, because these offices were unlikely to receive funding and management personnel sufficient to actually support and implement programs; and even if they did receive such funding, they would essentially be duplicating a function probably better performed by USAID, which had far more program management infrastructure and experience. More immediately, the OES Bureau responsible in State for spearheading this network had supplied some start-up funding to establish the offices but basically was looking to the regional bureaus to shoulder their operating expenses over the long term. The interest and willingness to do so was critical and varied by geographic bureau and individual host embassy. It was largely lacking in the case of the Charg# Jim Derham and his administrative staff at AmEmbassy Brasilia, so it was a slow, uphill struggle for me to secure and arrange adequate office space, funding, local hire support, etc., in order to have a viable structure in place in time for the arrival of the FSO ultimately assigned to the office, who had a separate regional mandate but ultimately reported to me. In the end I was able to create that infrastructure, but it took a lot of time, cajoling, tugging and pulling, and frankly boring administrative spadework...all for a project I thought conceptually flawed from the outset. But soldiering on and doing your best on behalf of ideas or issues with which you may not always agree is, of course, inherent in a Foreign Service career.

Q: In 2000, where did you go?

NICHOLSON: In 2000, I was reaching 50 years of age, at which point I was eligible for retirement and, weighing the pros and cons, I decided that 25 years had been interesting but it was time to do something else, especially since the next couple assignments I might expect would be more managerial than substantive in nature and thus of much less interest to me. I also was tired of lengthy overseas separations from friends and loved ones. So, I put in my retirement papers, came back to Washington, took the Department's three-month retirement seminar, and then departed the Service in September of 2000.

Q: What have you been doing in the last three years?

NICHOLSON: First of all, traveling a great deal on my own. I've always had a zeal for travel. Secondly, undertaking some long deferred dental work which was becoming really quite pressing. In fact, I should have done it a couple years before, but it was not the sort of thing you could do abroad very easily. That has involved many, many, dental appointments. And from time to time working for the Department of State. When I left, I thought it would be wise to hedge my bets in case, after being out of harness, so to speak, for anywhere from a couple of months to a couple of years, I would feel the need to do something professionally again or simply to stay in some way connected with the workaday world. So, I am on what's called the WAE list for the East Asia Bureau, although I have yet to take an assignment for them because it's only recently that I completed this dental work and could afford to be out of the country for several months at a stretch. In addition, I tested and qualified as a Portuguese language interpreter for the Office of Language Services at State and therefore am on their list of contractors to escort foreign officials and others invited to the United States by the Department for three-week itineraries and schedules of meetings under the International Visitors Program. I take two or three of those programs around the U.S. each year, either Portuguese speakers or people of any nationality who do not require an interpreter but to whom the Department has assigned an escort. It's been a great way to broaden my knowledge of my own country

and various institutions here. So, these various commitments altogether have taken me away from home 40-50% of the time since I left the Service, which is perhaps a little more travel than I would like. But when in Washington, I enjoy all the delights of Washington.

Q: Great. I want to thank you very much.

End of interview